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The Golden Magnet

A Tale of the Land of the Incas

BY

GEO. MANVILLE FENN

Author of "In the King's Name" "Nat the Naturalist" "Brownsmith's Boy"
"Devon Boys" "Quicksilver" &c.

WITH SIX FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS

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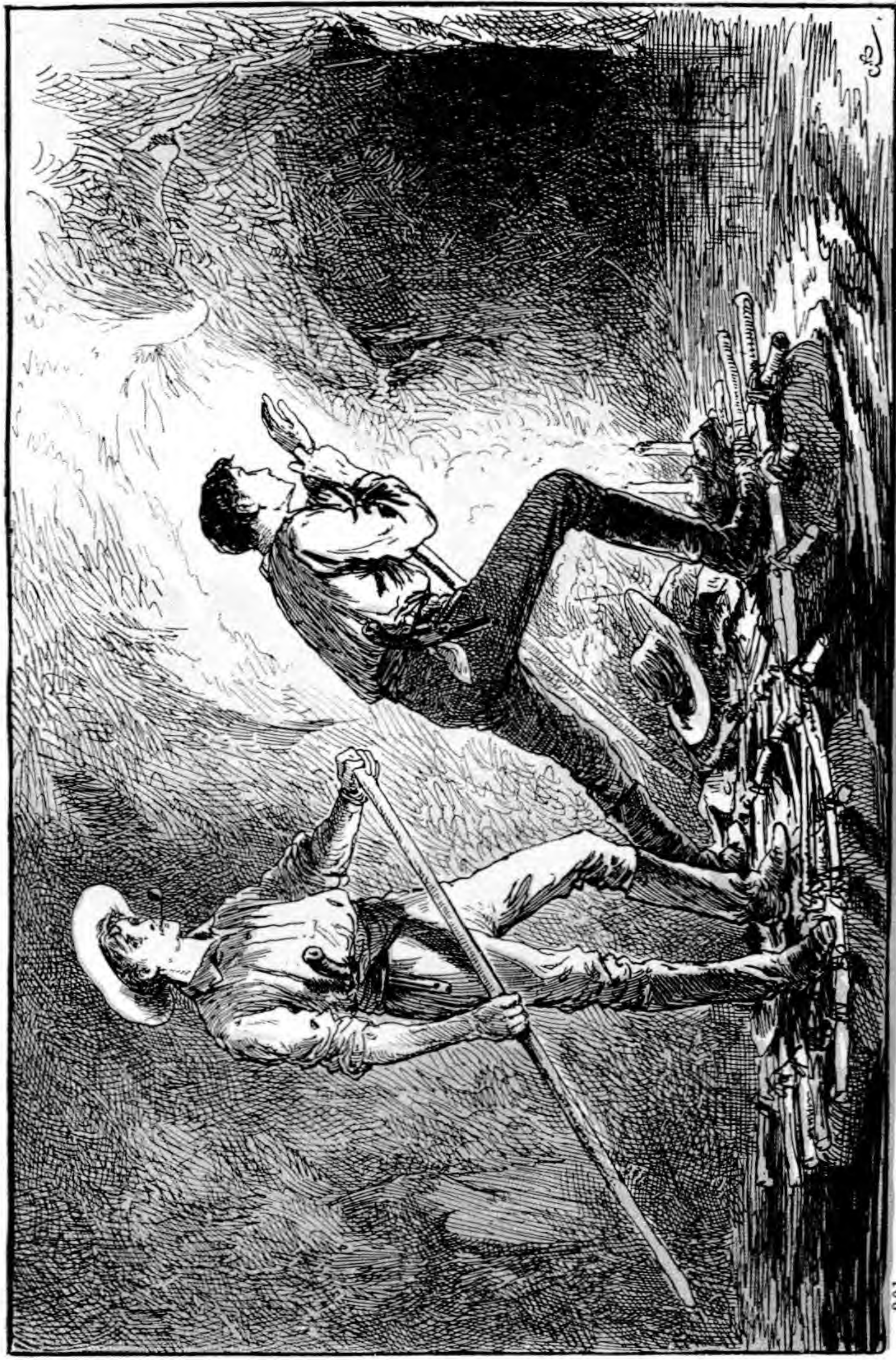
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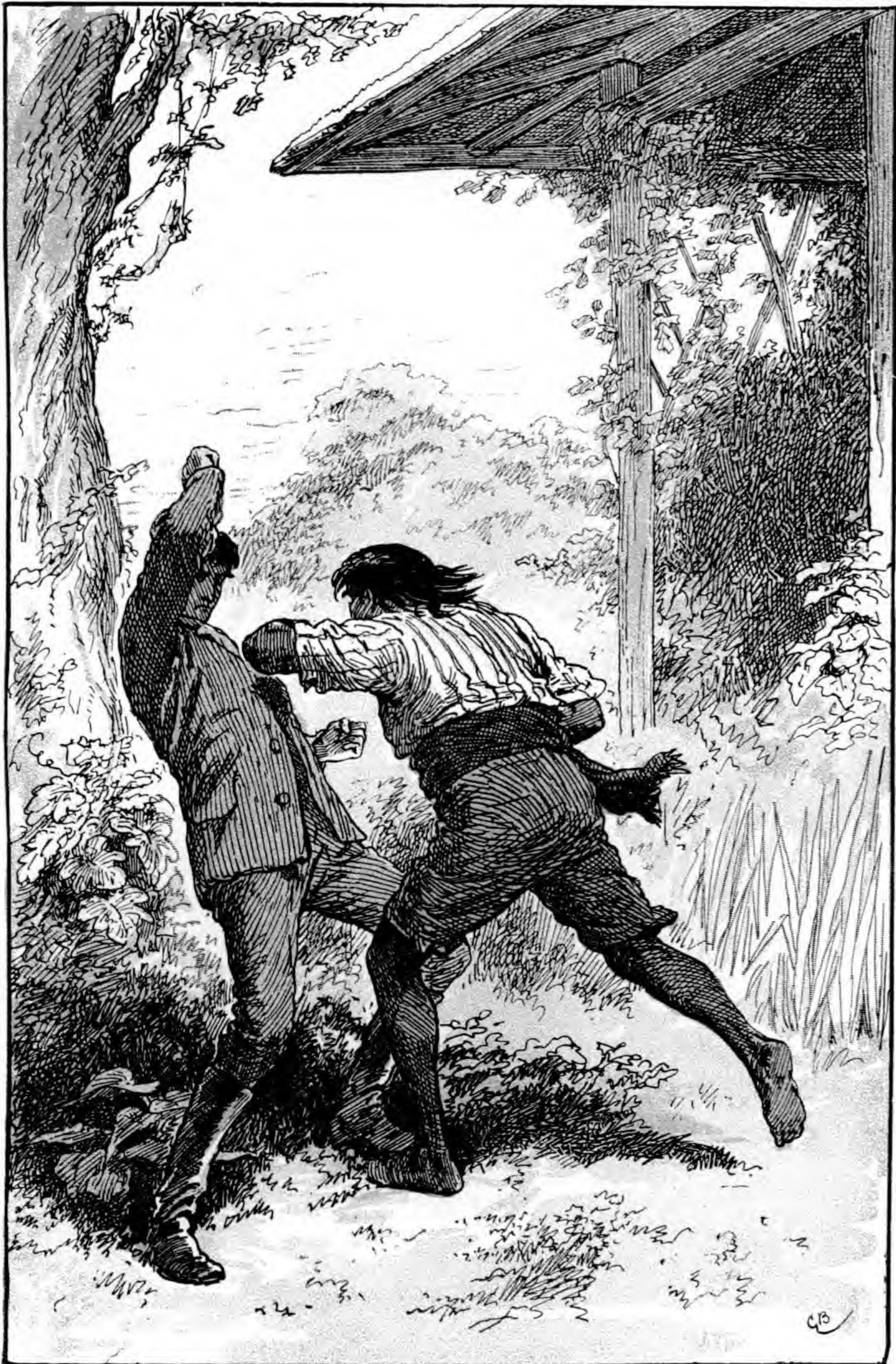


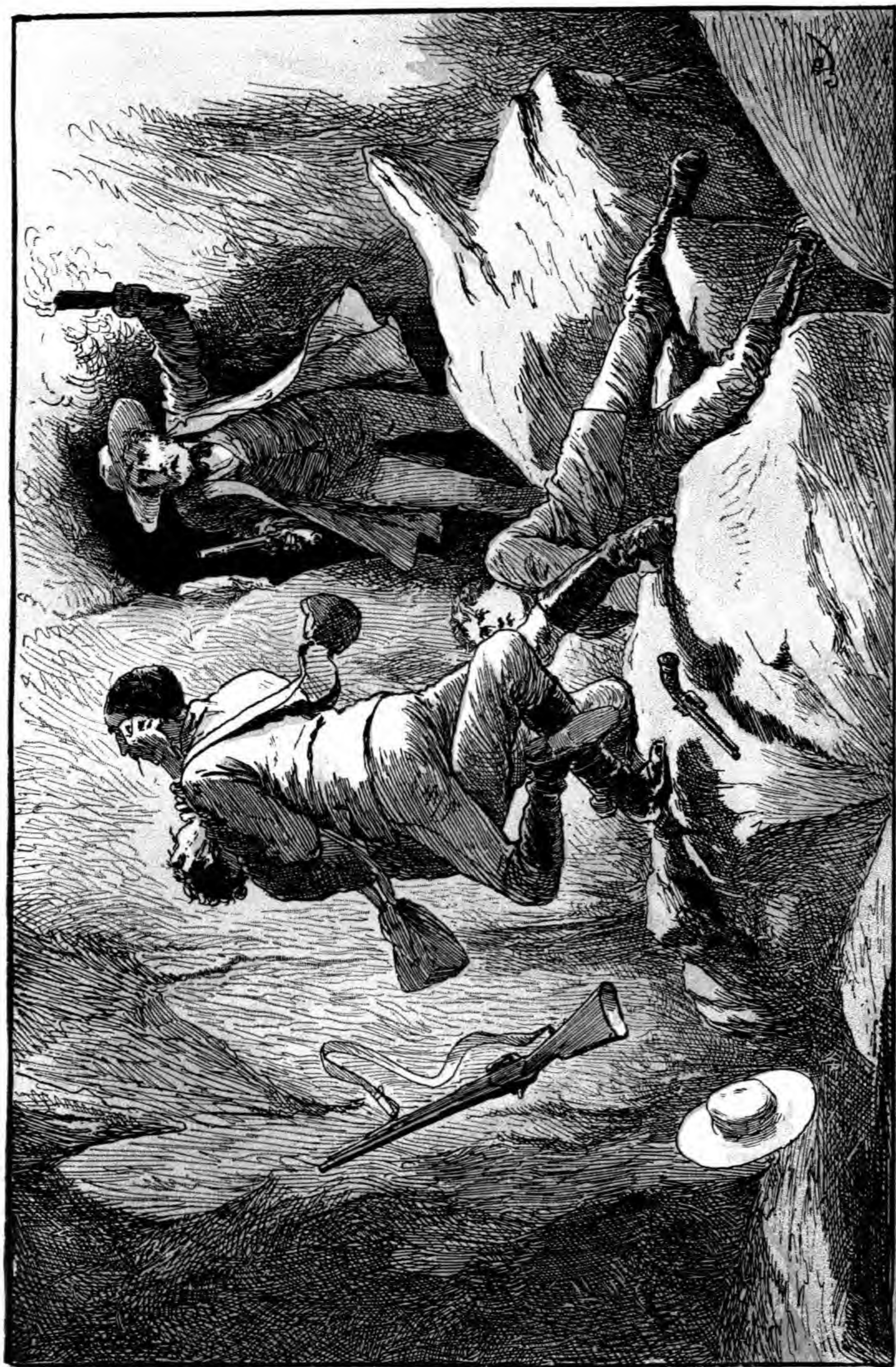






EXPLORING THE CAVERN—THE START.





CAPTURE OF SENOR GARCIA.—“A DEADLY EMBRACE.”

THE GOLDEN MAGNET.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

DAYBREAK in the Incas' realm on the far western shores, known to our fathers as the great wonderland—the great country discovered by adventurous mariners, and thought of, dreamed of, seen through a golden mist raised by the imagination—a mist which gave to everything its own peculiar hue; and hence the far-off land was whispered of as “El Dorado,” the gilded, “the Golden Americas,” and the country whose rivers ran over golden sand, whose rocks were veined with the coveted ore; and nations vied with each other in seeking to humble the haughty Spaniard, whose enterprise had gained him the strongest footing in the coveted region.

Daybreak at Tehutlan, the Incas' city, in the year 1533, and the peaks of the mighty mountains that appeared to pierce the bright blue sky, appearing to bear out the fabulous belief of the eastern lands, for their icy

summits glowed, and flushed, and sparkled in the rays of the sun, which gilded every pinnacle and turned each glacier into a river of gold, seeming to flow slowly downwards towards the vales and plains of the Andes, as yet flooded with the darkness of the night.

But soon the purple flood of darkness began to give place to golden light, as, still streaming down, as it were, from the mountain tops, the sunshine leaped in bright cataracts from point to point, rushing up this dark gully, that vast fissure, turning gloom into glowing landscape, and at last filling the vast vales with gladness and life, as the glowing picture burst into full beauty.

Here, at the foot of the mountains, flowed the mighty rivers of South America, bordered by the vast, eternal tropic forest, with its dank, steaming moisture—the home of the fierce beast, the loathsome reptile, and insect plagues innumerable. Far up the mountains was the land of ice and snow, fierce biting wind, and sleety tempest, with here and there patches of verdure, the pastoral land of the vicuna and llama flocks; but in the intermediate space, balanced, as it were, between the tropical heat and the wintry frosts, on the table-lands half-way up the mountains, was the stronghold of the Peruvian civilization. So near to the equator that intolerable heat might have been expected, an expectation, though, not fulfilled, for the elevation gave to the Peruvians a glorious climate, with all the brightness but none of the enervation of equatorial land.

Cottage, house, and palace, of no mean construction, were scattered here and there, the homes of peasant and Peruvian noble. But it was upon the temple crowning a near elevation that the eye would rest, in rapt astonish-

ment at its magnificence and grandeur. The description may sound like a scrap from some eastern fable, but none the less it is a fact culled from the pages of history.

For as that bright morning sun peered at length above the shoulder of an eastern hill, it was to shine full upon the Temple of the Sun and its glorious gardens.

Gold—gold everywhere—gold and precious stones. Fronting the great entrance, and ready to receive its first beams, was a golden representation of the sun itself—a vast golden face surrounded by rays stretching out in every direction—vast, massive, and glowing effulgently, reflecting back the sun's rays, and lighting the interior of the gold-decked temple.

For there was no paltry gilding here, but massive golden cornice, frieze, plate, stud, and boss ornamenting the massive walls—glistening, sparkling, and flashing back the sun's light, while, as if these were not sufficient, emeralds and other precious stones were lavishly spread in further ornamentation, adding their lustrous sheen to the warm glow already diffused through the magnificent building. Flash, sparkle—glistening streams of golden light, dancing like golden water upon the gorgeous walls, gilding even those who entered, so that face and garments were bathed and dyed in the glorious radiance, till the eye of the beholder ached, and the darkened intellects of the simple Peruvians might well believe that they were in the presence of the sun-god himself.

But not only was gold lavished upon the stone building, even to adorning its outer walls with a broad belt of the precious metal—solid, massive, and magnificently wrought; but the implements and vessels of the temple were of the yellow treasure. Huge vases stood upon the

floor filled with the produce of their land—offerings to the sun; perfume-censers, water-cruses, cistern-pipes, reservoirs, all were of the rich, ruddy metal.

The Peruvians called the ore in their language of imagery “the tears wept by the sun;” and these tears they toiled to gather, and their artificers worked them up with a cunning skill under the direction of the priests; and, as if to complete the wonders of the temple, and to give it adornments that should never lose their lustre, never fade, it was surrounded by an Aladdin-like garden whose plants were gold—golden of leaf, silver of stem, and with flowers sparkling in combinations of the two metals. Fountains of gold cast up golden water to fall back in golden basins—a mimic spray; and even then fresh objects of the goldsmith’s skill were seen in the golden-fleeced llamas grouped around.

But the glory of the Incas was passing. After a long period of prosperity the evil days were at hand, the wondrous barbaric civilization was about to be swept away; for the adventurous Spaniard, moved by his thirst for the gold, of whose existence rumour had from time to time told him, was now in the land. The simple people, coasting along in their light balzas or rafts, had seen the coming of what to them were then wondrous ships, cock-boats, though, as compared even to our collier brigs. War and rapine were in the land; the arms of the Spaniards—the thunder and lightning they bore with them in their guns—were everywhere victorious, and the riches of the temples were seized; gloriously wrought vessels were hastily molten down into ingots, along with plate, shield, and wonderfully-worked flowers; rapacity was triumphant, and upon one occasion the value of the treasure collected and

melted down into bars was computed at three millions and a half pounds sterling of our money.

The temples and their adornments were many and held sacred by the people, a sanctity they had ventured to hope would be observed by the conquerors; but the delusion was of short duration. The coming of a body of Spaniards was the signal for the stripping of each gorgeous building. Sacred vessel and ornament were seized upon and borne off; but the news was spread from temple to temple, from priest to priest, through the length and breadth of the land by means of swift-footed couriers, not by written letter, neither by word of mouth, but by means of a fringe of cords tied in knots, each knot and its place having its particular signification.

The alarm spread, and the day of evil being upon them—their sun-gods giving no sign of crushing the profane intruders—the priests looked upon it as a sign of wrath and punishment; and sooner than their treasure should fall into the hands of the fierce, remorseless conquerors, eagerly stripped their temples themselves, and in remote hiding-places, with many a mysterious rite, recommitted the gold to its parent earth, binding all who beheld by the most fearful bonds never to reveal the treasure-places to the conquerors, but to wait for the great day when the ancient glory of Peru should be revived, when the Incas should reign once more, and their religion flourish, ere the sacred treasures were disinterred.

But that day came not. European civilization began to take the place of that of the Incas, a new form of religion flourished, and from being monarchs in the country the Peruvians became the slaves, the hewers of wood and drawers of water of a new race. Generations came

and generations died out, and the years still rolled on till ages passed away; but though poor and degraded, the priestly caste existed still amongst the Indians, and from father to son was the great secret handed down in village after village, the idea of appropriating to their own use the buried treasures never once being dreamed of; but, with the wealth of princes scattered here and there throughout the country, the Indians watched over the treasures still, and handed down the secret to their children.

Some were discovered by stratagem, others by treachery, others, again, by accident; and while the exact bearings of the places were mostly well remembered, others died out of the memory of those to whose trust they had been committed, or in some cases died with them. But to this day it is believed that vast stores of the precious metal still lie waiting the hand of the discoverer, the barbaric relics of a fierce and bloody religion, the creed of an idolatrous people; and many an explorer unrewarded has wasted his days amidst the traces of the ruined temples and tokens of a grand civilization, scattered here and there amidst the forests and mountain-fastnesses of the mighty Andes.

CHAPTER II.

AFTER THREE AGES.

PERHAPS it was with reading *Robinson Crusoe* and *Sindbad the Sailor*—I don't know, but I always did have a hankering after going abroad.

Twopence was generally the extent of my supply of hard cash, so I used to get dreaming about gold, and to think that I had only to be wrecked upon some rocky shore to find the remains of a Spanish galleon freighted with gold in doubloons, and bars, and ingots, a prize to which I could lay claim, and be rich for ever after.

Now, with such ideas as these in my head, I ask anybody, was it likely that I could take to soap-boiling?

That was my father's business, and he was very proud of his best and second quality yellow, and his prime hard mottled. He had made a comfortable living out of it, as his father and grandfather had before him, helping to cleanse no end of people in their time; but I thought then, as I think now, that it was a nasty unpleasant business, whose odour is in my nostrils to the present day.

"You're no good, Harry," said my father, "not a bit, and unless you sink that tin-pot pride of yours, and leave off wandering about and wearing out your boots, and take off your coat and go to work, you'll never get a

living. You've always got your nose stuck in a book—such trash! Do you ever see me over a book unless it's a day-book or ledger, eh?"

My father had no sooner done speaking than my mother shook her head at me, and I went and stood out in the yard, leaning my back up against one of the great tallow hogsheads, and thought.

It only took me five minutes to make up my mind, for the simple reason that it was already seven-eighths on the way, this not being the first time by many a score that my father had given me his opinion respecting my future prospects in life; and as I neared twenty such opinions used to seem to grit in amongst my mental works, while the longer I lived the more I thought that I should never get my livelihood by soap-boiling.

Well, my mind was made up most stubbornly that I would go out to Uncle Reuben.

Just then, as I stood moodily there, I heard the sound of a scuffle and a sharp smack, and directly after, one of our lads, a young fellow of my own age Tom Bulk by name, came hurriedly out of the kitchen door, rubbing the side of his red face, but only to drop his hand the moment he caught sight of me leaning against the tallow-tub.

"What's the matter, Tom?" I said, though I knew well enough that Tom was in hot water.

"Got a flea in my ear, Mas'r Harry," he said, with a grin of vexation. "I caught it in the kitchen."

"So have I, Tom," I said bitterly; "but I caught mine in the parlour."

"Mas'r been rowing you agen, sir?"

"Yes, Tom," I said drearily, "and it's for the last time."

If I'm no good I may as well be off. I can't take to our business."

"Well, tain't so sweet as it used to be, sir; and it don't seem right that, to make other folks clean, we should allers be in a greasy mess. But what are you going to do, Mas'r Harry?" he said anxiously.

"Going abroad, Tom."

"So am I, Mas'r Harry."

"You, Tom?"

"Sure I am, Mas'r Harry, if you are," said Tom; and then and there he pulled off his great, greasy leather apron and soapy white slop, and fetched his shiny jacket out of the boiling-house. "I'm ready, Mas'r Harry," he exclaimed, as he fought hard to get one arm properly into his sleeve, but had to try again and again, because the button was off the wristband of his shirt, and the sleeve kept slipping up to his shoulder, necessitating a fresh attempt.

I burst out laughing at him, as I saw the earnest way in which he took my announcement; but the more I laughed the more solid Tom became, as he worked his body into his old coat, and then proceeded to button it right up to the chin, slapping himself several times upon the chest to settle a wrinkle here and there, and ending by spitting in his hands, and looking at me as much as to say, "Where's boxes, Mas'r Harry? Let's be off."

"Watcher larfin' at, Mas'r Harry?" he said at last.

"At you, Tom," I replied.

"All right, Mas'r Harry," he replied in the most philosophical way, "larfin' don't cost nothing, and it's very pleasant, and it don't matter when it's them as you know; but when it comes to somebody you don't know, why then it riles."

I turned serious on the instant.

"Do you know what you are talking about, Tom?" I said.

"Sure I do, Mas'r Harry. Talkin' 'bout going abroad."

"But where?"

"I'd' know, Mas'r Harry; only it's along o' you."

"But, my good fellow," I said, "perhaps I'm about to do very wrong in going."

"Then, p'r'aps I am, Mas'r Harry," he replied, "and that don't matter."

"But it might be the ruin of your prospects, Tom."

"Ruin o' my prospecks!" cried Tom. "Hark at him!" and he seemed to be addressing a pile of chests. "Don't see as there's much prospeck in looking down into a taller tub. I could do that anywheres."

"But you don't understand me, Tom," I cried.

"Don't want to, Mas'r Harry," he said. "I know as I'm allers gettin' my face slapped when I go into the kitchen; that I always get the smell o' the tallow in my nose and can't get it out; and that I hate soap to such an extent that I wouldn't care if I never touched a bit again."

"Oh, but you'll get on here, Tom, in time, and perhaps rise to be foreman."

"No, I sha'n't, Mas'r Harry, 'cause I'm coming along with you."

"But don't you see that I am going to a place where it would not be suitable for you."

"What's sootable for you, Mas'r Harry, would be just as sootable for me, and I'd work like one of the niggers out there, only harder."

"Niggers out where, Tom?"

"Where we're going, Mas'r Harry."

"How do you know there are any niggers where we are going, sir?"

"Oh, there's sure to be, Mas'r Harry. There's niggers everywheres, I've heerd tell."

"Oh, but really, Tom," I said, "it is all nonsense. Look here; I'm going out to join my uncle in South America."

"South America, Mas'r Harry!" said Tom eagerly. "why, that's just the very place I want to go to."

"I don't believe it, Tom," I said sharply. "If I had told you I was going to South Australia, you would have said just the same."

"Dessay I should, Mas'r Harry," he replied grinning.

"Well now, look here, Tom," I continued very seriously, "I am going out to join my uncle, and if I get on, and can see that there is a good chance for you out there, why, I'll send you word, and you can join me."

"No, you wont, Mas'r Harry," he said quietly.

"But I promise you that I will."

"No, you won't, Mas'r Harry."

"Don't you believe my word, Tom?"

"I believe that you believe you mean me to believe, Mas'r Harry," he said; "but I don't mean you to go without me, and so I tell you. There wouldn't be no getting on without me alongside o' you, that there wouldn't, and I'm going along with you."

"What are you two quarrelling about?" said my father, coming up just then.

"We were not quarrelling, father," I replied, snatching at the opportunity to lay bare my plans now that I was a little excited, for I had been rather nervous about how my proposals would be taken.

"Mas'r Harry's going out foreign abroad," said Tom sturdily; "and he said I warn't to go with him, and I said I would, sir—that's all."

"Oh, he's going abroad, is he?" said my father.

"Yes, sir," I replied, "I have made up mind to go and see if Uncle Reuben can find me anything to do."

"I hope you don't think that you are going to lead a life of idleness out there, sir?"

"Oh no, sir," I replied, "I mean to work."

"Then why don't you work here?" said my father.

"Because I hate the trade so, sir."

"Nice clean business too," said my father; "makes clean money, and keeps people clean. I suppose you know it's horribly hot out there?"

"Not so hot as in our boiling-house, sir," I replied.

"Humph!" said my father; and then, without another word, he walked back into the house.

"I *am* glad," cried Tom, rubbing his hands together softly. "What a time of it we shall have, Mas'r Harry!"

It was my turn now to be silent, and I stood watching Tom, and thinking as I struggled with myself that it would, after all, be very pleasant to have a sturdy trustworthy fellow like Tom always at my back when I was in a strange land. For I had read that the descendants of the old Spaniards in South America were courtly noble-looking gentlemen enough, but were bitter and revengeful, and not always disposed to look with favour upon Englishmen. How did I know but in my fortune-seeking adventures—for truly enough I meant to go out to seek my fortune—I might make enemies, and be sometime or another in danger. Then how good it would be to have such a henchman as Tom at my side.

My thoughts were very visionary, of course, for I could not foresee the strange adventures through which I should have to go; and for the moment I was about to turn sharp round on Tom, and shake hands and say, "That's right, Tom, we will go out and carve our fortunes together." But I checked myself directly, as I thought of my position.

For how was I to take out with me what to all intents and purposes would be a servant, when the probabilities were that I should hardly have the money to pay my own passage to the far-off land?

I was interrupted in my thoughts by Tom, who turned to me and said, "Give me your knife, Mas'r Harry, and I'll give it a good sharp up along o' mine. There's nothing like having a good keen knife in your pocket when you're going travelling, so they say."

"Very true, Tom," I cried laughing; "are you really in earnest over this?"

"Really in earnest, Mas'r Harry? Why, I never felt so earnest before in my life. To be sure I am, I want to see a bit o' the world."

"Very well then, Tom," I replied; "you will have a hard lot to share with me, but share it you shall if you like."

"I don't want to share or anything of the kind," said Tom gruffly. "You're young master, and I'm only lad. I know what I am and what I'm fit for well enough, Mas'r Harry, so don't you get talking no more about sharing danger, because it won't do."

"Oh, very well, Tom, we won't quarrel about that."

"That's right then, Mas'r Harry; so now give us hold of your knife."

I gave him my knife, in a thoughtful way, and he took it, opened it, and examined its edge.

"Blunt as a butter knife, Mas'r Harry," he cried. "And now, when do we start?"

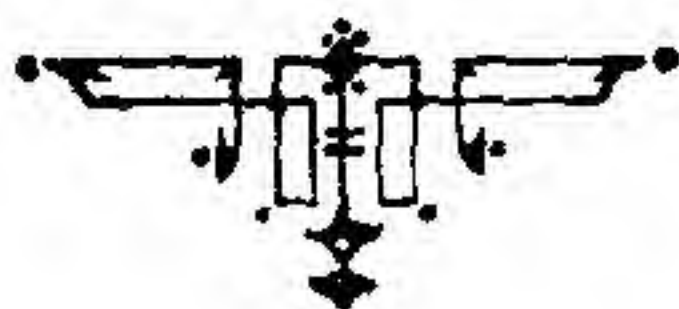
"Start, Tom?" I cried laughing. "Oh, it is not like going to London, we must make a great many preparations first, for it's a long journey."

"Is it?" he said. "Two or three hundred miles, Mas'r Harry?"

"A good deal more than two or three thousand, Tom," I replied.

"Oh, all right, Mas'r Harry. I don't mind how far it is, as long as we keep together. My word an' honour, won't it be different to making best yaller and mottled and cutting it into bars?"

"Different, Tom?" I said dreamily. "Yes, my lad, it will indeed."





CHAPTER III.

I COME TO AN UNDERSTANDING WITH MY FATHER.

I BELIEVE I lay in bed that night with my eyes wide open, seeing, as if in a waking dream, the whole of the eventful life I had pictured out for myself—a glorious career of adventure in a land of imaginary beauties—a land built up out of recollections of Robinson Crusoe's island, *Sir Edward Seaward's narrative*, *The Conquest of Peru*, and *The Lives of the Buccaneers*, with a little *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* dashed in by way of pickles or spice. All these formed themselves into a glowing series of scenes—a sort of panorama of the future, and I lay and watched in imagination the glorious prospect of river and forest, mountain and plain, where I was going to win fame and fortune, in a series of wonderful adventures, such as had never before fallen to the lot of man.

You will not be surprised to hear that I got up the next morning feverish and unrefreshed, and I felt quite envious of Tom when I saw him holding his shortly-cropped bullet head under the spout of the pump in the back yard, waggling the handle awkwardly as he had what he called "a sloosh."

For he looked so hale and hearty and fresh, as he looked up on hearing my step, and cried out to me—

“Lay hold o’ the pump-handle, Mas’r Harry, and work it up and down a bit, it’s awkward to do all by yourself.”

I felt quite spiteful as I took hold of the polished old handle and worked at it, meaning to give Tom a regular ducking; and I sent the pure cold well-water gushing out as he held his head under, letting the stream come first upon his poll, then upon one ear, then upon the other, and backing away at last to where he had hung his rough towel upon a hook in the wall, to seize it and begin to scrub.

“Oh, I say, Mas’r Harry, it’s ’evinly,” he panted, as he rubbed away. “Just you try it. Seems to make the strength go rattling through you like. Have a go: I’ll pump.”

I hesitated for a moment, and then, feeling that the cold shock would perhaps clear my heated brain, I threw off my cap and necktie, stripped my jacket from my shoulders, and, rolling up my sleeves, thrust my head under the spout, and the next moment was panting and gasping, and feeling half drowned and confused, as Tom sent the water streaming out with liberal hand.

“Now then, what Tom-fool’s game’s this?” said a voice, as I withdrew my head and held out my hand for the towel; “washing the folly out of your head, Harry?”

“No, father,” I said quietly, as I rubbed away, feeling a refreshing glow thrill through me as the reaction set in. “I was trying to freshen myself up after lying awake all night thinking of my future.”

“Then you are still harping on that project?” he said quickly.

"Yes, sir; I have quite made up my mind to go."

"What, and leave a quiet sensible business in search of a mare's nest?"

"Don't be angry with me, father," I said. "I know all about the business, and what a struggle you have had for years just to get a bare living."

"Well, boy, that's true," he said with a sigh.

"I know, too, how things are getting worse and worse, and that the large London works and competition make the business poorer every year."

"They do, my lad, they do," he said more quietly. "But I had hoped that you would grow into a clever industrious man, and set the poor old business on its legs again."

"I'd try and be clever, father," I replied, "and I know I could be industrious, but my two arms would be of no use to contend against machinery and steam."

He shook his head.

"I've thought about it for long enough now, father," I said; "and I can see well enough that there's no chance of improving our little business without capital, and that if that is not to be had it must get smaller and smaller every day."

"Why, Harry, my boy," he said, as we strolled down now into our bit of garden, "I didn't think you could see so far into a millstone as that."

"Oh, father!" I cried warmly, "do you think I have never felt miserable and discouraged to see what a fight it has been with you to make up your payments month after month?"

"I never thought you gave a bit of heed to it, my lad," he said warmly, as he held out his hand, and took

mine in a hearty grip. "I've misjudged you, my boy; I've misjudged you. I didn't think you had so much thought."

"Oh, father!" I cried, "why, all my wandering thoughts have had the aim of getting on in life, and for a long time past it has seemed to me that England's growing too full of people fighting against one another for a living; and I felt that some of us must go out and try afresh in another place."

"Like the bees do, when they swarm, my lad," said my father, looking down at one of the old straw hives, with its pan turned over the top to keep off the rain. "Well, perhaps you're right, Harry—perhaps you are right. I won't fight against it, my boy. I only wish you luck."

"Father!" I cried, and I was about to say something else, but it would not come, try how I would; and I stood there holding by his hand in the garden, while he looked me in the face with a calmer, more gentle look than I had seen in his eyes for some time past.

He was the first to break the silence, and then he clapped me on the shoulder in a hearty, friendly way.

"There's mother making signs that breakfast's ready, my boy. Come along in."

We went in and took our places at the table so quietly that my mother's hands began to tremble so much that she could hardly pour out the tea.

"What have you been doing, Harry, to make father so cross?" she said at last.

"Nay, nay, mother, nothing at all," said my father quickly. "It's all right. Harry and I have been coming to a bit of an understanding—that's all. We haven't been quarrelling a bit"

"Are you sure, dear?" said my mother dubiously.

"Sure? ay!" cried my father. "Why, Harry and I were never better friends."

"Indeed, no," I cried excitedly.

"You are both keeping something back from me," she cried, with her hands trembling and the tears coming into her eyes.

"Oh, no, we won't keep anything back from you, mother," said my father kindly. "Harry and I have been talking about his plans."

"Not for going away?" said my mother; "don't say that."

"But I must say it," said my father. "Harry is quite right. I didn't like it at first; but, as he says, there are too many of us here, and he is going to seek his fortune in a foreign land."

"Oh, my boy, my boy!" she cried.

"Same as your brother Reuben did," said my father. "Come, come, old lady, courage! We must look this sort of thing in the face."

"And I'll go out there, mother, and see if Uncle Reuben will help me. If he can't, I'll try for myself, for I will get on; and some day, if I don't come back a rich man, I'll come back with a sufficiency to make the old age of both you and my father comfortable. Trust me, I will."

For some few minutes there was very little breakfast eaten; but at last my father roused us up, talking quite cheerfully, and evidently trying to reconcile my mother to my going, and then we went on with the meal.

"So Tom wants to go with you, does he?" said my father. "Well, he's a good, hard-headed sort of fellow, and likes you, Harry. He'd better go."

"But isn't he likely to lead poor Harry into mischief?" said my mother.

"No; he's more likely to act as ballast and keep him from capsizing if he carries too much sail. Tom's all right."

My mother accepted the inevitable in a very short time, and soon began to talk as mothers do—that is to say, homely mothers—for almost as soon as she had wiped her eyes she exclaimed—

"Why, Harry, my dear, you must have at least six new shirts."

"Must I, mother?" I said smiling.

"Yes, my son, and of the best and strongest stuff. I'm glad to say that I've just finished a couple of pairs of strongly-knitted stockings."

And from that hour, I believe, my mother was happy in her task of getting ready my sea-chest, putting in no end of pleasant little surprises for me, to be ready when I was in the far-off land.

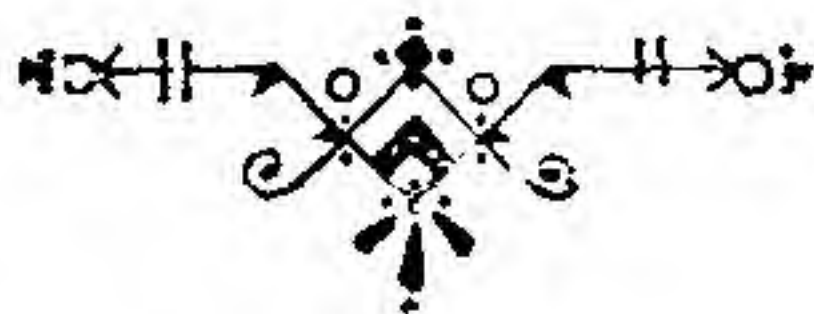
Tom, too, was not forgotten, poor fellow, for he had no one to take tender notice of him.

"And it don't matter a bit, Mas'r Harry," he cried cheerily, "I don't want a lot o' things. One clean shirt and a pocket-comb—that's about all a chap like me wants."

But he was better provided than that, and at last, before a couple of months had passed away, our farewells were said and we started for Liverpool, in low spirits with our partings, but full of hope and eager ambition, since at the great western port we were to take our passage in one of the great steamers for the West Indies, where we would have to change into a smaller trading vessel which would take us on to Caracas.

"No soap-boiling out there, Mas'r Harry," cried Tom cheerily; and he gave a long sniff as if to get some of the familiar old smell into his nose.

"No, Tom," I replied quietly. "We are going to begin a new life now;" for the future looked to me a far more serious affair than I had imagined before in the midst of my sanguine aspirations and rather wild and dreamy ideas.





CHAPTER IV

TOM CATCHES THE COMPLAINT.

“**O**H, my eye, Mas’r Harry! Dear heart, dear heart, how bad I do feel!”

“Why, you kept laughing at me, you wretch,” I said, as I rejoiced at Tom’s downfall.

“Sure-*ly*, so I did, Mas’r Harry—I did, I did—but I didn’t think it was half so—so bad as this here. Oh, my eye! how badly I do feel!”

“You old humbug, you!” I cried in my triumph, for I was getting over my troubles, “sneered and jeered and pooh-poohed it all, you did, Tom, and now it has you by the hip at last.”

“No, it hasn’t, Mas’r Harry,” he groaned. “It aren’t the hip, it’s more in the middle. Oh, my eye! how ill I am!”

“I’m precious glad of it, Tom,” I said.

“Well, I do call that cowardly, Mas’r Harry—I do really,” groaned Tom—“’specially as you wasn’t half so bad as I am.”

“Why, I was ten times worse, Tom,” I cried.

“Oh, Mas’r Harry! don’t say that,” groaned the poor fellow, “because it’s impossible. If—Oh, my eye! how ill I do feel!—if you’d been ten times as bad as I am,

you'd have died ten times over. Oh, dear! oh, dear! How is it the doctors can't cure this horrid——? Oh, dear me! how ill I do feel!"

It was very unfeeling, of course, but all the same I sat down close to poor Tom as he lay upon the deck, and roared with laughter to see his miserable yellow face, and the way in which he screwed up his eyes. But it was only three days before when I was really ill that Tom was strutting about the deck ridiculing sea-sickness, and telling me what a poor sort of a fellow I was to knuckle under to a few qualms like that.

For I must confess to having been one of the first attacked when we were well out at sea. It was the first time I had ever seen the blue water; and no sooner did a bit of a gale spring up, and the great steamer begin to climb up the waves and then seem to be falling down, down, down in the most horrible way possible, than I began to prove what a thorough landsman I was, and, like a great many more passengers, was exceedingly ill.

I remember thinking that it would have been much better if I had stayed at home instead of tempting the seas.

Then as I grew worse I called myself by all sorts of names for coming upon such a mad expedition.

Then I vowed that if I could get on shore again, I'd never come to sea any more.

Lastly I grew so bad that I didn't care what became of me, and I felt that if the steamer sank I should be relieved from all my terrible pains.

And all this time Tom was skipping about the deck as merry as a lark, chaffing with the sailors or making friends with the firemen, and every now and then

coming to me and making me so cross that I felt as if I could hit him.

"Now do let me fetch the doctor to you, Mas'r Harry," he kept on saying, pulling a solemn face, but with his eyes looking full of fun.

"I tell you I don't want the doctor. Don't be such an ass, Tom," I cried.

"But you do seem so ill, Mas'r Harry," he said with mock sympathy. "Let me see if I can get you some brimstone and treacle."

"Just you wait till I get better, Tom," I said feebly. "You nasty wretch, you. Brimstone and treacle! Ugh!"

My sufferings ought to have awakened his sympathy, but it did not in the least, and I found that nobody thought anything of a sea-sick passenger.

But at last I got over it, and, to my intense delight, all of a sudden Tom was smitten with the complaint, and became more prostrate than even I.

I did not forget the way he had tortured me, and you may be sure that I did not omit to ask him if he would try the brimstone and treacle. I behaved worse to him, I believe, for I tortured him by taking him cold fat pork and hard biscuits, and paid him various other little attentions of a kindred sort, making him groan with pain, till one day—it was while the sea was very rough, and I thought him too ill to move—he suddenly got up.

"Tell you what, Mas'r Harry," he said, "I'm not going to stand your games no longer. I shall get up and be better;" and better he seemed to grow at once, so that by the next day he was almost himself again, and we stood by the high bulwarks watching the great Atlantic rollers as they came slowly on, as if to swallow up our ship.



CHAPTER V.

A SAILOR ON SEA-SERPENTS.

“**I**T do puzzle me, Mas’r Harry,” said Tom, as we sat in the chains one bright, sunny day, when the storm was over, but a fine stiff breeze was helping the toiling engines to send the steamer along at a splendid rate.

“What puzzles you, Tom?” I asked.

“Why, where all the water comes from. Just look at it now. Here have we been coming along for more’n a week, and it’s been nothing but water, water, water.”

“And we could go on for months, Tom, sailing, sailing away into the distant ocean, and still it would be nothing but water, water, water.”

“Well, but what’s the good of it all, Mas’r Harry? Why, if I was to get up a company to do it, and drain it all off, the bottom of the sea here would be all land, and people could walk or have railways instead of being cooped up in a great long tossing box like this, and made so—Oh, dear me, it nearly makes me ill again to think of it.”

“Ah! that would be a capital arrangement, Tom,” I said smiling. “What a lot more room there would be on the earth then!”

"Wouldn't there, Mas'r Harry?" he cried eagerly.

"A tremendous deal more, Tom. Every poor fellow might have an estate of his own; but where would you drain the water to?"

"Where would I drain the water to, Mas'r Harry?"

"To be sure," I said, enjoying his puzzled look. "If you take it away from here you must send it somewhere else."

"Of course, Mas'r Harry, of course," he replied eagerly. "Oh, I'd employ thousands of navvies to dig a big drain and let the water right off."

"Yes, I understand that," I replied; "but where is the drain to lead?"

"Where's the drain to lead?"

"Yes; where is the water to run?"

"Where's the water to run?" said Tom, scratching his head. "Where's the water to run, Mas'r Harry? Why, I never thought of that."

"No, Tom, you never thought of that; and you can't alter it, so it is of no use to grumble."

"Don't you two young fellows slacken your hold there," said a sailor, looking over at us.

"'Taint likely, is it?" said Tom grinning; "why, where should we be if we did?"

"Down at the bottom some day," growled the sailor as he walked away, and Tom looked at me.

"Just as if it was likely that a fellow would let go and try and drown hisself, Mas'r Harry. Think it's deep here?" he added as he gazed down into the dense blue water.

"Yes, Tom, very," I replied, gazing down as well, for the water was beautifully transparent, and the foam left by the bows of the steamer sparkled in the brilliant sunshine as we rushed along.

"Deep, Tom?" I said, "yes, very."

"How deep, Mas'r Harry; forty or fifty foot?"

"Two or three miles, p'r'aps, Tom," I replied.

"Go along! Two or three miles indeed!" he said, laughing.

"I don't know that it is here, Tom," I continued, "but I believe they have found the depth nearly double that in some places."

"What! have they measured it, Mas'r Harry?"

"Yes, Tom."

"With a bit of string?"

"With a sounding-line, Tom."

"And a bit of lead at the end?"

"Yes, Tom, a sounding-lead with a great bullet, which they left at the bottom when they pulled the line in again."

"Think o' that, now!" cried Tom. "Why, I was wondering whether a fellow couldn't go down in a diving-bell and see what the bottom was like, and look at the fishes—say, Mas'r Harry, some of 'em must be whoppers."

"Ay, my lad," said the same sailor who had before spoken, and he rested his arms on the bulwark and stared down at us; "there's some big chaps out at sea here."

"Could we catch some of 'em?" asked Tom.

"Oh, yes," said the sailor. "Dessay you could, my lad, but I wouldn't advise you to try a sixpenny fishing-line with a cork float and a three-joint hazel rod with a whalebone top—you know that sort, eh?"

"Know it? I should think I do," cried Tom. "So does Mas'r Harry here. We used to ketch the gudgeons like hooroar down in the sharp water below the mill up at home."

"Ah!" said the sailor, "so used I when I was a boy; but there ain't no gudgeons here."

"What sort o' fish are there, then?" said Tom.

"Oh, all sorts: bonito, and albacore, and flying-fish, sometimes dolphins and sharks."

"Any whales?" cried Tom, winking at me.

"Sometimes; not very often, my lad," said the sailor quietly. "They lies up in the cold water, more among the ice. We're getting every day more into the warm."

"I'm sorry there ar'n't any whales," said Tom. "How long might they be, say the biggest you ever see?"

"Oh!" said the sailor, "they mostly runs thirty or forty foot long, but I saw one once nearly eighty foot."

"What a whopper!" said Tom, giving me a droll look.

"Sounds big," said the sailor, "but out here in the ocean, my lad, seventy or eighty foot only seems to be a span long, and no size at all, while the biggest shark I ever see—"

"How long was that?" said Tom; "a hundred foot?"

"No," said the sailor drily; "he was eighteen foot long—a long, thin, hungry-looking fellow, with a mouth and jaws that would have taken off one of your legs like a shot."

"Well, but if an eighty-foot whale don't look big," said Tom, "an eighteen-foot shark must be quite a shrimp."

"Ah! you wouldn't think so," said the sailor quietly, "if you were overboard and one of 'em after you."

"But I thought you'd got monsters out here at sea," said Tom, giving me another of his cunning looks, as much as to say, "You see how I'll lead him on directly."

"So we have," said the sailor, staring straight out before him, "only it don't do to talk about 'em."

"Why?" I said quickly, for the man's quiet, serious way impressed me.

"Well, you see, sir," he replied, "if a man says he's seen a monster out at sea, and it isn't a whale which people knows of, having been seen, they say directly he's a liar, and laugh at him, and that isn't pleasant."

"Of course not," I replied, "if he is telling the truth."

"Of course, sir, if he's telling the truth; and, take it altogether, what I know of sailors after being at sea thirty-two year, beginning as a boy of twelve, sailors ain't liars."

"Well, let's hope not," I said.

"They ain't indeed, sir," said the man earnestly. "They do foolish things, drinking too much when they get ashore after a voyage, and spending their money like asses, as the saying goes; but a chap as is at sea in the deep waters, and amongst storms and the lonesomeness of the great ocean, gets to be a serious sort of fellow—he isn't the liar and romancer some people seem to think."

"No, but you do spin yarns, some of you?" said Tom.

"Well, yes, of course," said the sailor. "Why not sometimes for a bit of fun? but when a man's in 'arnest he ought to be believed."

"Of course," said Tom; "but I say, mate, you never see the sea-serpent, did you?"

The man did not answer for a few moments, but stood gazing straight out to sea before saying quietly:

"I don't know. A man sees some curious things out at sea in the course of thirty years; but he gets precious cautious about telling what he's seen after being laughed

at, and chaffed when he's been only telling the simple truth. Why, I remember, once when I was out with one captain, we saw what we thought was the sea-serpent or something of the kind, and observations were taken, it was all entered in the log, and sent to the papers afterwards; and the skipper got laughed nearly out of his skin for a romancer. He was a queen's captain—man-o'-war it was, and all was as regular as could be; officers and men saw it all, but they were so roasted afterwards that, when anything of the kind's seen now, they say nothing about it."

"But do you really mean to say you believe that there are monsters in the ocean that we have no regular account of in books?"

He turned to me, and pointed out to sea.

"Isn't there room there for thousands of great things, my lad; such as we've never seen or heard of?" he said.

I nodded.

"Why, do you know that in some parts out here the water's over four miles deep? They've measured it, my lad, and they know."

"Say, Mas'r Harry, that's more than your two mile," cried Tom.

"Ay, and I dessay there's parts where it's more than twice as deep, and when you come to think of the thousands of miles you can sail without nearing land, I say there's room for thousands of things such as nobody has ever seen."

"That's very true," I said.

"Why, I remember, down at home in Norfolk, when I was a boy, there was a big pool that people never fished, because they said there was no fish in it, and so it had

been longer than anybody could recollect; and at last there was a plan made to drain a bit of bog close by, and a great dyke was cut. This set the farmer the pool belonged to thinking that if he cut a ditch to the big dyke, he could empty the old pool, and if he did he would get 'bout three acres of good dry ground instead of a black peaty pool; so he set a lot o' chaps at work one dry summer when they weren't busy, and we boys went to see it done. Now, you may believe me or you mayn't, my lads."

"Oh, we'll believe you; won't we, Mas'r Harry?" said Tom grinning.

"Well, I shall," I replied, and the sailor went on.

"When the water began to get low in that pool we used to see that there were fish in it, and at last there was a regular set out catching of them in the bits of holes where the water had left them."

"Oh, I say, Mas'r Harry, don't I wish we had been there!" cried Tom.

"Ay, it was fun, my lad, for we got scores of tench, some of 'em three and four pound weight, and there was six or seven carp ever so much bigger. One of 'em weighed nine pounds."

"That was a fine un," said Tom.

"But the biggest fish we got was a pike, and he was the only one there. That chap must have eat up all that had been before him, and he weighed three-and-thirty pound. He was close upon four foot long, and a gentleman there said if he had been in good condition he would have weighed five-and-forty, for he was as thin as a lath."

"I should have liked to see that fish," said Tom.

"Ay, it was a fine one. We boys daren't tackle him, he was so big," continued the sailor; "and then out of the mud they got bushels of great eels, some of the biggest I ever saw."

"Did you though?" said Tom.

"Ay, we did. When the water had got right down low, you could see 'em squirming about like snakes, and when they'd got all we could see they laid down boards over the mud, and punched about in the soft places when great fellows kept coming up to the top, and they got no end more. They were the biggest eels ever I see, and as fat as butter."

"Were they though?" said Tom.

"Ay, they were, my lads; and what I wanted to say was this—If so be as those fish could live in that bit of a three-acre pool without people knowing of their being there, don't you think there can be no end of big fishes and things in the great waters, thousands of miles from shore, such as menfolks has never seen?"

"Well, it do seem likely," said Tom; "but I never could swallow the sea-serpent."

"No, my lad, more likely to swallow you," said the sailor drily.

"But come now," said Tom drily. "Did you ever come across the great sea-serpent?"

"A mate o' mine," said the sailor, "told me he once saw out Newfoundland way part of a great cuttle-fish that had been washed ashore after a storm. It was a great jellyfish sort of thing, and it was thirty foot long; and he said he was sure it couldn't have been more than half of it, and the next day he saw one of its arms all full of suckers, and it was twenty foot long."

"Well, that must have been a pleasant sort of thing," said Tom, as I sat there listening thoughtfully, for the sailor seemed disposed to go on talking.

"I remember one year, fifteen years ago I daresay it is, we were going from Singapore to Hong Kong, and it was a strangely hot calm time, when all at once away about a mile on our lee bow I saw something rise up out of the sea five-and-twenty or thirty feet, as it seemed to be, but it went down again directly; and I rubbed my eyes, thinking it was fancy, but directly after out it came again, making a curious kind of thrust like as if it was a long neck of something under the water. Then down it went again, and I called the officer of the watch to look at it; and he came with his glass, laughing-like, but just then out it came again and he tried to get a glimpse of it through his glass, but he never could be quick enough, for there was no telling where the thing would dart out its head, and when it did come up it went down again directly.

"I was in hopes it would come nigher, but it went the other way, shooting out its head once when it was a good way off, and then we did not see it any more."

"And what do you think it was?" I said eagerly.

"Not knowing, can't say," he replied quietly. "Our officer said, half-laughing, half-puzzled like, that he should have said it was the sea-serpent, only no one would believe him if he did."

"Did you ever see anything else?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, my lad, I've seen a good many things that people wouldn't believe. I remember once seeing a curious thing off the muddy Malay coast, a long way north of Malacca, where you have mangrove swamps right

down about the mouths of the rivers, places where the crocodiles go in and out."

"I say, how big's a crocodile?" said Tom sharply.

"All sizes, mate," said the sailor. "I've seen 'em two foot long and I've seen 'em twenty."

"Oh, not bigger than that?" said Tom contemptuously.

"No, my lad, that's the biggest I ever see, but I've heerd of 'em being seen five or six and twenty."

"But tell us about the strange thing you saw off the Malay coast," I said impatiently.

"Oh, ah! yes," he said, "that was just as the mist was lifting that lay between us and the coast. It was in a shallow muddy sea, and three or four of us was trying to make out the trees ashore, and wondering whether there would be any chance of our getting some fresh fruit and vegetables before long; when, all at once, one of my mates claps his hand on my shoulder, and he says—'Lookye yonder, mate.' 'Why, it's the sea-sarpent!' says another. 'Well, that is a rum un,' says another. And then we stood looking at what seemed to be a great snake swimming, with twenty or thirty feet of its neck outer water; and it was holding it up in a curve just like a swan, and sometimes its head was right up high and sometimes curved down close to the water with its neck in a loop, and all the time it was going along five or six knots an hour. 'Why, it is the sea-sarpent!' says another of our mates, 'look all behind there; you can see its back as it swims, 'tis a hundred foot long, see if it isn't!' I looked, and sure enough it did seem to be a great length behind, nearly covered by the water; but, as I stood, it didn't seem to me like a snake swimming, for it seemed more than ever as if what we saw was a great

slimy slaty-coloured thing, the make of a swan, swimming with its body nearly all under water and its head out; or, as I afterwards thought, just like one of the big West Indy turtles, such as you'll see by and by if you're lucky."

"Like a turtle?" I said.

"Yes, my lad," he continued, "a great flat-bodied turtle, that might have been thirty or forty foot long and half as much across, while it had a great neck like a swan."

"But what made you think it was like that?" I asked.

"Because you could see its back out of the water now and then, and it wasn't like a serpent, for it rose over like a turtle's, and sometimes it was higher out of the water sometimes lower; and what I saw as plain as could be was the water rippling up fore and aft, just as if the thing had flippers which it was working to send it along."

"Did your captain see it?" I asked at last.

"No, my lad, for we was too full of wonderment just then to do more than stare at the thing, till all at once it seemed to stretch its neck out straight with quite a dart, as if it had caught something to eat, and then it wasn't there."

"Didn't it come up again?" said Tom.

"No, my lad, we never see it no more."

"How far was it from the shore?" I asked.

"Five or six miles, my lad, more or less," he replied; and just then there was a call for all hands to take in sail, and our yarn-spinner went away.



CHAPTER VI.

ONWARD.

“**T**HAT was a rum sort of tale, Mas’r Harry,” said Tom as soon as we were alone. “Do you believe him?”

“Yes,” I replied, “I believe he is sincere.”

“What! and see those great things, Mas’r Harry, out at sea?”

“I believe he saw something,” I replied, “but whether it was just as he described is another thing. There’s plenty of room, though, in the sea for more than that, and perhaps people will find out some day that we have not seen everything that there is in the world.”

“Talk about snakes, though, Mas’r Harry,” said Tom suddenly; “where did you say we was going?”

“To Caracas first.”

“Ah! Crackers—that’s it. Do you think there’ll be any snakes there?”

“Not sea-serpents, Tom,” I said laughing; “but up the country where we are going there are sure to be plenty of land-serpents.”

“Not big ones, though, Mas’r Harry?”

“I should say there will be some very big ones in the swamps by the great rivers.”

"Think o' that now!" said Tom. "Big serpents! ugh! I can't abide eels even. I don't know how I should get on with serpents. But I say, Mas'r Harry, it's all nonsense about sea-serpents, ar'n't it?"

"I don't know, Tom," I replied. "Perhaps they never grow to a very large size; but there are thousands of small ones."

"What! sea-serpents, Mas'r Harry?"

"To be sure there are."

"But not in the sea—snakes couldn't swim?"

"Indeed but they can, Tom. Why, I've seen our common English snake go into a stream and swim beautifully with its head reared above the water, and after swimming about for some time, come out."

"Think of that now!" said Tom. "Where's the sea-serpents, then?"

"Oh, all about the Indian and Chinese Seas."

"Big uns?"

"I never heard of their being more than five or six feet long, but some of them are very poisonous. People have died from their bite."

"Have they, though?" said Tom. "And where else are there any, Mas'r Harry?"

"Oh, they swarm in the Caspian Sea. I've heard that they float about in knots of several together on calm, sunny days, and they come ashore in the shallow parts."

"Caspian Sea!" said Tom; "where may that be—anywhere near Crackers?"

"No, Tom," I said; "we've left that behind us in the Old World."

"And a good job too," said Tom; "we don't want sea-

serpents where we're going. Why, Mas'r Harry, I shall never like to do a bathe again."

Soon after this Tom proposed that we should try sea-fishing, but when we had borrowed lines and begun to make our preparations the weather set in so rough that we never once had a chance. In fact there were many days when we had no opportunity of coming on deck unless we were prepared to be drenched with the spray that deluged the deck as some great wave struck the steamer's bows, and then flew in driving showers from end to end.

There were times when I fancied that the officers looked quite serious, but they said nothing, only were very particular about the hatches being kept closed.

Then came a spell of finer weather, during which we reached Jamaica, and I was thinking of getting a few days ashore, so as to see something of this beautiful island; but it was not to be, for we found that we were very late, that the steamer into which we were to shift had been waiting for us three days, and if we did not take passage in her we should have to wait a fortnight, perhaps longer, for another.

"And I did so want to see the niggers in the sugar plantations, and taste real Jamaica rum. Say, Mas'r Harry, that stuff people drink in England's all gammon."

"Why so?" I asked.

"Because it's brown and yellow, like wine," he replied. "Real Jamaica rum's quite white."

"Well, Tom," I said, "I don't know that it will make any difference to us; and as to the sugar plantations and the niggers, as you call them, I daresay you will be able to see some at my uncle's place."

"But he don't grow sugar, does he, Mas'r Harry?"

"I don't know about that," I said, "but I think so. I know he grows a great deal of coffee."

"Think of that, now, Mas'r Harry! And tea, too?"

"No, he does not grow tea, Tom."

"Well, I do wonder at that," said Tom, "because you see tea's better than coffee to keep to."

"How about climate, Tom?" I said laughing.

"Climate? Ah! yes, I s'pose that do make a difference, Mas'r Harry. But he might grow sugar."

"Perhaps he does, Tom," I said, "but we shall see before very long."

"Well, it won't be because it isn't hot enough," said Tom, wiping his face. "Phew! the sun does go it out here."

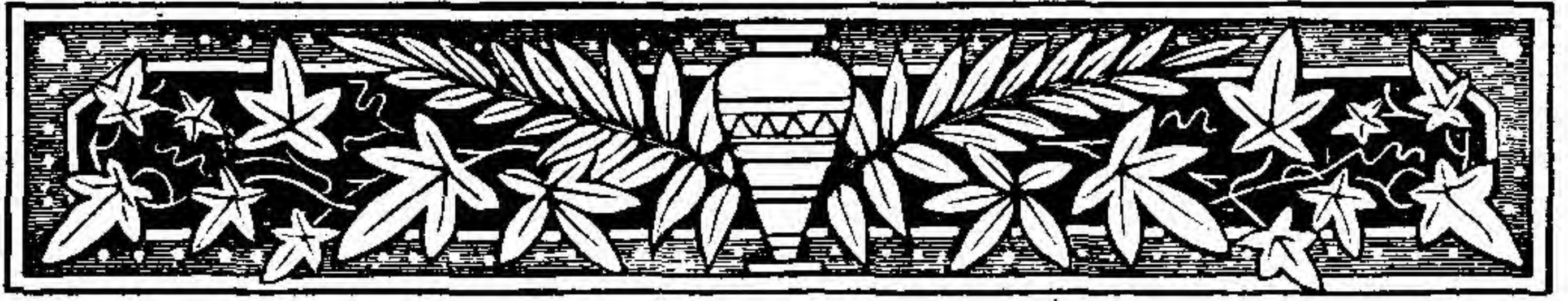
"But it may be colder where my uncle lives, Tom."

"Why, how can it be, Mas'r Harry, if it's anywhere out here?"

"Perhaps he's high up in the mountains, and there it will be much colder."

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, that is a good un, Mas'r Harry," laughed Tom. "You had plenty of schooling and I had none, but I do know better than that. Going up closer to the sun and finding it colder! Well, that is a rum un, and no mistake."

I tried to explain to Tom why it was that the climate was colder in mountain regions, but I suppose I did it in too bungling a way for him to comprehend, and he stood out for his own opinion till he saw, some weeks later, a magnificent specimen of a snow-capped mountain, at which he stared in amazement; and even then he was obstinate enough to declare that, after all, the dazzling whiteness might be due to the clear transparency of crystal rock.



CHAPTER VII

FEEDING THE SHARKS.

IT was a wonderful change from the stormy, tossing Atlantic, with its bitter winds and chilling cold, to the calm transparency of the brilliantly-blue tropic waters, where everything looked so unclouded and so bright. When we neared one or other of the islands, everything seemed so fresh that we began to forget the perils and troubles of our long, uneventful, but sufficiently troubled voyage. For there were golden or dazzlingly white sands, upon which the calm sea softly rippled, while close down to the water's edge we could see what Tom called spike plants and sweep's-brush trees—these being his names for plants of the Yucca family and lovely slender-tufted palms.

When we gazed down into the clear waters from the deck of our comparatively small steamer, we could see fish in plenty, for the brilliant sun seemed to light up the sea beneath the vessel's keel, while as the screw churned up the water and the steamer rushed on, the scaly occupants of the deep flashed away to right and left, darting out of sight like so many shafts of silver through the sunny depths.

It was a wonderful change from cold and chill to a

delicious atmosphere, where the soft sea-breeze fanned our cheeks, though we soon became aware of the fact that the sun possessed power such as we had never experienced before.

"Why, it's like as if it came through a burning glass, Mas'r Harry," said Tom; "and, I say, just you try to touch that copper hood thing that goes over the compass. I did, and it burned my hand just as if it had come out of a hot fire."

"Well, I don't want to burn my hands, Tom," I replied. "I can see how hot it is by the pitch standing up in beads all along the ropes."

"And it's making black icicles outside some of the boards, Mas'r Harry, only they're soft instead of hard. I say, isn't it jolly?"

The next day it was a great deal hotter, for there was not a breath of air, and Tom came to me as I was hanging listlessly over the side, for I was too hot to stir.

"Say, Mas'r Harry," he said, "isn't this what they call being in the tropics?"

"Yes, Tom; this is the tropics."

"Well, they're hot tropics, and no mistake—out-and-out hot uns. It won't get any warmer than this, will it?"

"Warmer, my lad?" said one of the sailors; "why, this is nothing to what it is sometimes. I've known it so hot that the fellows have been half-roasted, and when the skipper's piped all hands to bathe in a lugsail overboard, to keep away the sharks, you've heard the lads sizzle as they jumped into the water."

"They got quite red-hot, then?" said Tom quietly.

"Well, hardly red-hot, though they were mostly very red—more brown-hot, I should say."

"Thanky," said Tom. "Much obliged;" and the sailor went away chuckling.

"He thinks I believe him, Mas'r Harry," said Tom quietly; "but I'm not quite such a fool as all that."

"Oh! never mind their nonsense, Tom," I said; "there are too many beautiful things to see, for us to pay heed to all that these fellows say."

"Ah! you're about right there, Mas'r Harry," said Tom; "but somehow I am a bit disappointed."

"Why?" I asked.

"At not getting ashore. Only think of it, Mas'r Harry! having a gun apiece, and going wandering up the country somewhere, seeing all there is in one of these islands."

"Have patience, Tom," I replied; "and I daresay you'll get as much adventure as you'll care to have."

I did not know how true a prophet I was then. In fact, perhaps if I could have foreseen all we should have to go through, I might have shrunk back from my undertaking.

Farther and farther every day now we went on and on, putting in at first one island port and then another, but never having time to do more than just go ashore. A visit up the country was quite out of the question.

"It's a rum un, Mas'r Harry," said Tom, on our first landing; and his broad countrified face expanded into a grin as he stopped opposite a stout old negro woman who was selling fruit. No sooner did she see Tom displaying his white teeth than she showed hers—two long rows like ivory—and these two stood smiling one at the other till Tom recovered himself, and invested sixpence in plantains and oranges.

"They're black enough out here, and no mistake, Mas'r

Harry, said Tom; "and oh, I say, just you taste these—they're splendid."

The waving cocoa palms and the beautiful flowers that we saw brought into the bright little market made me feel, like Tom, that I should like to go farther afield; but I comforted myself with the recollection that we should soon be at our destination, and that then there would be plenty to see and do.

Back on board once more, we spent our time basking in the sunshine, drinking it in as it were, for it seemed so delightful in spite of its heat after our dull, cheerless, hazy home in the winter season.

I took no note of how the time went, and this part of the voyage, though in a slow clumsy boat, seemed far the quickest portion of the journey, so that I was quite surprised when one morning I came on deck, and found not only that we were in sight of land, but in sight of port—my landing port—the end of my sea journey, for we were right across the Gulf of Mexico, abreast of La Guayra, where the orders were given, and anchor was dropped in the open roadstead, where, calm as it was, we could still feel the great swell that came softly sweeping in, making the great steamer rock and roll first to this side then to that, till, heavily laden though she was, she careened over so that her copper glistened in the sun.

I was beginning to feast my eyes upon the beauty of the place, when Tom, who was right forward, shouted to me to come, and as I glanced at him I saw that he was waving his hands so excitedly that there must be something worth seeing, and I ran forward.

"Here's something for you to have a look at, Mas'r Harry," he cried. "You recollect that big pike the sea-

serpent sailor told us about—ugh! four feet long didn't he say?"

"Yes, Tom; but there are no pike here."

"No pike, Mas'r Harry! Why, here's a couple of 'em cruising about just under the bows here, and you can see 'em as plain as plain, and they're twelve or fourteen foot long at least."

"Yes, Tom," I said, as I climbed on to the bulwark, and sheltering my eyes gazed down into the beautiful water, where the bottom was plainly visible many feet below. "Yes, Tom," I said, "they're twelve or fourteen feet long at least, but they are not pike."

"Not pike, Mas'r Harry! What are they then?"

"Sharks, my lad," I replied. "Sharks."

"What, them?" he cried excitedly as he stared down. "So they're sharks are they?" Well, I'm glad I've seen 'em anyhow; but I shouldn't have known that they were sharks. Mustn't bathe here then," he continued; "that is if all they say about sharks is true."

"I believe it's true enough, Tom," I said.

"Let's try 'em, Mas'r Harry," said Tom eagerly.

"Try them! What, bathe? Why, Tom, you must be mad!"

"I never said a word about bathing, Mas'r Harry," he responded rather grumpily. "I said, Let's try 'em. I say if we had a big hook and line, Mas'r Harry," he continued, with a broadly comical grin, "and baited with nice fat little niggers, what sport we should have."

"Nice fun for the little niggers as you call them, Tom," I said.

"Yes, it wouldn't be very nice for them, Mas'r Harry. But I say, let's see if they'd go at a bait."

"How?" I cried.

"Stop a moment, and I'll show you," he said; and running to where one of the firemen was having a quiet pipe on deck, I saw Tom accost him, and then go down into the stoke-hole, to come up again directly with a big lump of slaty coal, bearing which he joined me.

"Let's drop this in gently," he said, "just over them; or, no, it would make such a splash some of the sailors would come to see. I've got a bit of string in my pocket."

Tom always had a bit of string in his pocket, and unrolling it he loosely tied it round the lump of coal, and then getting well on the bulwark raised the coal gently up and over the side, beginning to lower it down.

"Take care you don't go over instead of the coal, Tom," I said with a grim smile.

"Oh, I say, Mas'r Harry, don't talk like that!" he cried; "it's enough to give a chap the shudders. It was only my fun about the little niggers. Now, then, I think I can shake it out of the loop."

The sharks were just below us, and eight or ten feet down, as Tom lowered the piece of coal right to the surface, without making any splash and disturbing the water so as to interrupt our view of what we hoped would take place. Then giving the string a jerk he loosened the coal, which began to descend rapidly, its bright black surface flashing in the brilliant sunshine till it was half-way down, when there was a tremendous swirl in the water, which danced and flashed and obscured our vision, only that we caught sight of something—of two somethings—quite white, and then by degrees the water calmed down, and there were the two

sharks still there, but turned round with their heads in a fresh direction.

"Why, they took the coal, and one of 'em's swallowed it, Mas'r Harry," cried Tom excitedly.

"No, Tom: I think I can see it right down below there," I said; "but they did have a try at it."

"What are you young fellows doing there?" said a voice; and, as we turned sharply round, there stood the captain. "What! are you fishing?"

"No, sir," said Tom; "I only dropped something over to see if the big fish there would take it."

"Oh, I see!" he exclaimed. "Sharks! Yes, there are plenty of them, my lads. No bathing here. You should get the cook to give you a lump of bad pork, and hang that over by the string: that would fetch them."

Tom took the hint, and running to the cook told him what the captain said, returning at the end of a minute to where I was still watching the two monsters, the captain having gone.

"I'll tie this tight on, Mas'r Harry," cried Tom, suiting the action to the word. "I say, don't I wish we had a hook!"

The piece of meat was soon firmly secured, and twisting one end of the string round his hand, Tom took his old place beside me, chuckling and laughing, and began to lower down his bait.

"I say, Mas'r Harry, I wish it was a bar o' soap. If one of 'em swallowed it I wonder what he'd think of the taste."

By this time Tom had his bait close to the water, and directly after he let it drop on the surface, where it made a little disturbance and then floated.

Almost at the same moment it appeared as if, without the slightest movement, one of the sharks was growing bigger and closer. It seemed to fascinate us, so cautiously did it rise nearer and nearer, till all of a sudden it rolled right over on its side, showing the creamy white of its under parts; there was a gleam of teeth, a swirl in the water, and the greasy lump of salt pork disappeared.

As it did so I saw Tom's arm give a sudden jerk, and as he uttered a yell I realized what was wrong, flinging my arms round him, and threw myself inboard, so that I dragged him with me, and we fell together upon the deck.

"Oh, my eye!" gasped Tom as we sat up on the deck; and he held up his hand, beginning to unwind the broken string from it, and showing how deeply it had cut into it before it gave way.

"What an escape, Tom!" I cried, and as I spoke I felt that I must be looking very white.

"I should have gone overboard if you hadn't laid hold o' me, Mas'r Harry," he said, looking blankly in my face. "How strong that string was, and how it cut!"

"How stupid of you to tie it round your hand like that!" I said.

"Well, I s'pose it was, Mas'r Harry," he said ruefully; "but one didn't think of it then."

"Well, let's have a look at the sharks," I said, as the horror of what might have happened passed off.

"No, thankye, Mas'r Harry," said Tom sulkily. "I've had enough shark for one day. My hand's 'bout cut in two, and my arm's 'bout pulled outer the socket, and one of my legs was twissen under me when I come down. I've had enough shark to last me half a lifetime



CHAPTER VIII.

THE NEW LAND.

AS the shuddering feeling of what Tom had escaped passed off, we both thought it would be better to say nothing about it. We knew that he had acted foolishly; and I felt that I ought to have known better, and then soon enough, boy like, we forgot it all.

For there was a bright future spread before us, and I began to wonder how it was that with such lovely places on the face of the earth, people could be content to live in old England. There, seen through the bright transparent atmosphere, were convent, cathedral, castle, and tower, grouped at the foot of a mountain, glistening with endless tints as it towered up nine thousand feet, wall and battlement running up the spurs of the great eminence.

The scene was lovely, and I was in raptures then with all that lay before me, and again I asked myself how people could be content in chilly Europe; but I soon understood all that.

Tom was walking by my side, and turning to him—

“What do you think of it, Tom?” I said.

“Well, ’taint so very bad, Mas’r Harry,” he grumbled out. But ain’t them sharkses?”

I followed his pointing finger, and, to my horror, I could see, cleaving the blue and creamy-foamed water, close in-shore, the black fins of one—two—three—half a score of sharks; while all the time, dashing and splashing in and out of the surf, busily unloading boats and larger vessels, were dozens of mulatto porters.

I expected every moment to hear a shriek and to see the silver foam tinged with red. My heart beat intermittently, and there was a strange dampness in my hands; but I soon learned that familiarity bred contempt, and that probably from the noise and splashing kept up, the sharks rarely ventured an attack. But all the same, that one incident made me gaze down into the blue depths where we were at anchor with a shudder, and think that the waters were not so safe as those of home.

I had yet to learn something of the land.

“What’s this place called, Mas’r Harry?” said Tom, interrupting my reverie. “You did tell me, but I’ve forgotten.”

“La Guayra!”

“Humph!” ejaculated Tom. “Why can’t they call places by some name in plain English?”

But the various strange sights and sounds soon silenced Tom’s tongue, and, tired out at last with a long walk, we went to the house that had been recommended to me, and after partaking of coffee—the best I ever remember to have drunk—I sought my room, Tom insisting upon sleeping on the floor in the same chamber, and my last waking recollections were of the pungent fumes of tobacco, and the tinkle, tinkle, twang of a guitar beneath my window.

I must have been asleep about three hours, and I was dreaming of having found gold enough to load a vessel

homeward bound, when I was wakened by some one shaking me violently, and as I started up I became aware of a deafening noise, a choking sensation, as of dust rising in a cloud, and the voice of Tom Bulk.

"Mas'r Harry—Mas'r Harry! Wacken up, will you?"

"What's the matter?" I gasped, springing out of bed, but only to reel and stagger about before falling heavily.

"That's just how it served me," said Tom. "Kneel down, Mas'r Harry, same as I do. The house is as drunk as a fiddler, and the floor's going just like the deck of a ship."

"Where are you?" I cried, trying to collect my scattered faculties, for, awakened so suddenly from a deep sleep, I was terribly confused.

"Oh, I'm here!" said Tom. "Give's your hand. But, I say, Mas'r Harry, what's it mean? Do all the houses get dancing like this here every night, because, if so, I'll sleep in the fields. There it goes again! Soap and soda! what a row!"

Tom might well exclaim, for with the house rocking frightfully, now came from outside the peal as of a thousand thunders, accompanied by the clang of bell, the crash of falling walls, the sharp cracking and splitting of woodwork, and the yelling and shrieking of people running to and fro.

"So this ere's a native storm, Mas'r Harry?" shouted Tom to me during a pause.

"No!" I shouted in answer, as with a shiver of dread I worded the fearful suspicion that had flashed across my brain. "No, Tom, it's an earthquake!"

"Is that all?" grumbled Tom. "Well, it might have come in the daytime, and not when folks were tired. But I thought earthquakes swallowed you up."

"Here, for Heaven's sake help me at this door, Tom!" I shouted, "or we shall be crushed to death. Here, push—hard!"

But our efforts were vain, for just then came another shock, and one side of the room split open from floor to ceiling.

"The window—the window, Tom!" I shrieked. And then, thoroughly roused to our danger, we both made for the casement, reaching it just as, with a noise like thunder, down went the whole building, when it seemed to me that I had been struck a violent blow, and the next instant I was struggling amongst broken wood, dust, and plaster, fighting fiercely to escape; for there was a horrible dread upon me that at the next throes of the earthquake we should be buried alive far down in the bowels of the earth.

I was at liberty, though, the next minute.

"Tom—Tom!" I shouted, feeling about, for the darkness was fearful. "Where are you?"

"All right, Mas'r Harry," was the reply; "close beside you."

"Here, give me your hand," I shouted, "and let's run down to the shore."

For in my horror that was the first place that occurred to me.

"Can't, sir," said Tom. "I ain't got no legs. Can't feel 'em about there anywheres; can you?"

"What do you mean?" I cried. "This is no time for fooling! Look sharp, or we shall lose our lives."

"Well, so I am looking sharp," growled Tom. "Ain't I looking for my legs? I can't feel 'em nowheres. Oh, here they are, Mas'r Harry, here they are!"

By this time I had crawled to him over the ruins of the house, to find that he was jammed in amongst the rubbish, which rose to his knees; and, as he told me afterwards, the shock had produced a horrible sensation, just as if his legs had been taken off, a sensation heightened by the fact that he could feel down to his knees and no farther.

"This is a pleasant spot to take a house on lease, Mas'r Harry," he said, as I tore at the woodwork.

"Are you hurt?" I exclaimed hastily.

"Not as I knows on, Mas'r Harry, only my legs ain't got no feeling in 'em. Stop a minute, I think I can get that one out now."

We worked so hard, that at the end of a few minutes Tom was at liberty, and after chafing his legs a little he was able to stand; but meanwhile the horrors around were increasing every instant, and, to my excited fancy, it seemed as if the earth was like some thick piece of carpet, which was being made to undulate and pass in waves from side to side.

Dust everywhere—choking, palpable dust; and then as from afar off came a faint roar, increasing each moment, till, with a furious rush, a fierce wind came tearing through the ruins of the smitten town, sweeping all before it, so that we had to cower down and seek protection from the storm of earth, sand, dust, plaster, and fragments hurled against us by the hurricane.

But the rush of wind was as brief as it was fierce, and it passed away; when, in the lull that followed, came shrieks and moans from all directions, and the sounds of hurrying, stumbling feet, and then, all at once, from out of the thick darkness a voice cried:

"Quick—quick! To the mountain—the sea is coming in!"

Then came more wails and shrieks from out of the darkness, followed by a silence that was more awful than the noise.

For full five minutes that silence lasted, broken only by the fall of some tottering beam. Then came quickly, one after the other, short, sharp, shivering vibrations of the earth beneath our feet—a shuddering movement that was transferred to one's own frame; and then I began to understand the meaning of the cry we had heard respecting the sea, for from where I supposed it to be, now came a singular hissing, rushing noise, gradually increasing to a roar, as of mighty waves, and mingled with that roar there was the creaking and grinding together of shipping and the hoarse shouting of the crews for help.

But gradually the noises ceased, save when a shuddering shock once more made the earth to tremble beneath our feet, and some scrap of wood or plaster to fall from riven wall or roof. The tremendous choking dust, too, began to settle down as we groped our way along over the ruins that choked the streets. Now we were lost—now, after a struggle, we regained the way, trying to join one of the hurrying bands of fugitives hastening from the place.

I spoke to one man, asking him if there was any more danger, but his reply was in Spanish; and at last, led by Tom—who seemed by instinct to know his way—we went down to the shore, strewn with wreck, when, seizing a rope, and drawing a boat to the sand, Tom told me to enter, and we half lay there, rising and falling upon the wave—rocked gently, but wakeful ever, till the sun rose over the sea—bright, glorious, and peaceful, as if there had been no havoc and desolation during the night.



CHAPTER IX.

AN EARTHQUAKE ON FOUR LEGS

“**S**AY, Mas’r Harry, you won’t stop in this blessed place, will you?” said Tom, as, in the full light of day, we were, some hours after, busily helping in the town, extricating the dead and wounded, and assisting to bear them to the temporary hospital prepared for their reception.

The house where we had slept was, like hundreds more of the lightly-built tenements, prostrate; and on visiting the scene our escape seemed wonderful; while everywhere the mischief done was appalling—houses toppled down, streets choked with ruins, towers split from top to bottom, and stones hurled from the unroofed buildings into the gaping cracks and fissures running down the streets.

But now that the first fright was over, people seemed to take the matter very coolly, flocking back into the town, to sit and smoke and eat fruit amidst the ruins of their homes, while others quietly set to work to restore and repair damages.

“Has there ever been an earthquake here before?” I said to a merchant who spoke English.

“Earthquakes, my dear senor? Yes, they are common things here.”

"But will the inhabitants rebuild the town?"

"Surely. Why not? The site is charming."

I had my thoughts upon the subject, but I did not express them; so, too, had Tom, but he did express his as above.

"Say, Mas'r Harry, you won't stop here, will you?"

"No," I said; "we are going up the country."

"Because this place ain't safe—there's a screw loose underground somewheres. Not that I mind. Earthquakes ain't so much account after all, if they'd come in the day; but all the same, I wouldn't stop here."

I had had no intention of stopping, only just long enough to see the place and make arrangements for the prosecution of my journey; but this catastrophe hurried my departure, and at the end of three days we were both mounted on mules, travelling over hot, bare plains, with the sun pouring down until one's brain seemed scorched; and when at last water was reached, it was thick and muddy-looking, so that, but for our horrible thirst we could not have touched it.

My ideas of South America had been undergoing a great change during the past few days, and, quite disappointed, in the midst of a long burning ride I made some remark to Tom about the heat.

"Hot, Mas'r Harry!" he said. "Pooh! this ain't hot. 'Tis a little warmer than the other place, because there is no sea-breeze, but I could stand a deal more than this. These here—will you be quiet, then?—these here mules is the worst of it, though, sir. They won't go like a horse, nor yet like a donkey; and as to kicking—"

Tom stopped short, for he wanted his breath for other purposes, his steed having once more turned refractory,

kicking, rearing, shaking itself in an effort to dislodge its rider, spinning round and round, laying its long ears flat upon its neck, tucking its tail close in between its legs, and then squeaking and squealing in the most outrageous manner imaginable.

I have no doubt that it was most terribly unpleasant to the rider, painful, probably; but to a looker-on it was one of the most ludicrous of sights, and in spite of heat, weariness, and a tendency to low spirits, I laughed till the tears ran down my cheeks, while Tom grinned with pain and held on with both hands to the refractory beast.

"Ah! would you?" cried Tom, as the brute lifted its heels higher than usual, nearly sending him over its head. "There never was such a beast as this here, Mas'r Harry. If I'd only got a thicker stick!"

One could not pity him much, for at starting he had rejected three or four quiet-looking beasts as too slow, and chosen the animal he rode, or rather tried to ride, for, if the reader will pardon the Irishism, a great deal of Tom's riding was walking, and performed by leading his beast by its bridle.

But really it was a deceptive beast, and to have seen it drooping its head and walking calmly and peacefully by its hirer's side, no one would have imagined that it possessed so much mischievous sagacity as it very soon displayed when anyone attempted to mount it.

"I like 'em with some sperrit in 'em, Mas'r Harry," Tom had said. "If it was a horse it would be different; but if one's to ride a donkey, let's have one with something in it."

And verily Tom's donkey, as he called it, was not very long before it showed that it had, indeed, something in it,

a great deal more, in fact, than Tom had bargained for. We did not pass many trees by the track, but when we did come upon one Tom had certain information thereof, for the mule rubbed his rider's leg vigorously against the trunk. The sight of a muddy pool of water was the signal for him to squeak, elevate his heels, and then go off at a sharp gallop, when, if his rider did not quickly slip off behind, he would be carried into the pool and bathed, for the mule would drink his fill and then indulge in a roll in the mud and water. In short, I never before saw so many acts of cunning in an animal, one and all directed at dislodging the rider.

At first I was in a state of tremor lest his vagaries should infect the beasts ridden by myself and the guide; but no, they were evidently elderly mules—bordering on a hundred they might have been, from their gray and mangy aspect. They had sown their wild oats years before, and all that they did was to trudge solemnly on, quiet and sure-footed, if not swift.

Tom's mishaps had their pleasant face, though; they served to make a horribly monotonous journey more bearable, and on an average he was in grief, some way or another, about every two hours.

"Oh, senor," said the guide proudly, "the mule is perfect! He is a magnificent beast, but he has his antipathies. He used to be ridden by the padre, and he is a most holy and Christian mule. He shows his dislike a little sometimes like that, because the senor who rides him is a heretic."

"Oh!" I said.

"Yes, it is so, senor, I assure you," said the guide. "Let your friend ride my beast and I will take his, and then you will see how peaceable he is."

At first Tom did not seem disposed to agree, for he did not like being beaten; but I ordered him to dismount, his accidents tending so greatly to lengthen our journey. So the exchange of mules was made, and on we went once more.

“See, senor!” said the guide. “He is a pattern mule, is Juan; he goes like a lamb. It is a natural dislike that he has not learned to subdue. He does not know what good men and generous there are amongst the heretics.”

“Haw, haw, haw, haw! Look at that, Mas’r Harry—there’s a game!” roared Tom, for the guide had hardly done speaking, just as we were travelling pleasantly along, before Juan, the mule, stopped short, put his head between his legs, elevated his hind-quarters, and the next moment the guide was sitting amongst the stones staring up at us with a most comical expression of countenance.

“The beast has been cursed!” he cried angrily as he rose. “Car-r-r-r—r-r-r-r—ambo! but you shall starve for this, Juan!”

“Let me have another turn at him,” cried Tom, as he started off to catch the mule, which had cantered off a few hundred yards, and was searching about with his nose amongst the sand and stones for a few succulent blades of grass where there was not so much as a thistle or a cactus to be seen.

But Juan had no wish to be caught, and after leading his pursuer a tolerable race, he stopped short, and placed all four hoofs together, so as to turn easily as upon a pivot, presenting always his tail to the hand that caught at his bridle.

“Poor fellow, then! Come, then—come over,” said Tom soothingly.

But the only response he obtained was an occasional lift of the beast's heels, and an angry kick.

"You ignorant brute, you can't understand plain English!" cried Tom angrily.

"No, senor, he is a true Spanish mule," said the guide, coming up.

Between them, Tom and he soon managed to catch Juan, when, holding tightly by the reins, the guide vented his displeasure and took his revenge by thoroughly drumming the poor brute's ribs with a stout stick, after which Tom mounted, and our journey for the next two hours was without incident.

But we were not to get to the end of the day without mishap. The sun had begun to descend, and we were panting along, longing for the sight of water to quench our burning throats, when Juan began to show that the pain from the guide's drubbing had evaporated. First of all he indulged in a squeal or two, then he contrived to kick the mule I rode upon one of its legs, when, emboldened by the success of the manœuvre, he waited his time, and then, sidling up to his companion ridden by the guide, he discharged a fierce kick at him, nearly catching the guide in the shin; but the result was a tremendous crack from a stick right upon Juan's back—a blow which made him shake his head with dissatisfaction till his ears rattled again.

He had forgotten the pain, though, in ten minutes, and the first hint we had thereof was a squeal and feat of sleight of *heel*, in which, to all appearances, Juan stood perpendicularly upon his nose and fore-feet for half a minute, like a fleshly tripod, while his rider, or rather his late rider, rolled over and over, the centre of a cloud of

impalpable dust, coughing and sneezing, and muttering fiercely.

"There!" exclaimed Tom, as he jumped up and began beating the dust from his garments. "That's four times that brute has had me off to-day. I've rid everything in my time, Mas'r Harry, from a pig up to a parish bull. I've been on sheep and donkeys, and when I was at the blacksmith's I rode all sorts of restive beasts as come to be shod, but I never did get on such a brute as that; his skin don't fit him, and he slippers about between your legs all sorts of ways; but I mean to ride him yet. Now just you try him half an hour, Mas'r Harry, to see what he's like."

"Not I, thank you, Tom," was my reply. "I'm very well content."

"So am I, Mas'r Harry, only he makes me so sore; but I ain't bet yet, I can tell him. Come over, then!"

But the mule would not "come over, then!" and there ensued a fierce fight of kicks between Tom and his steed, Tom essaying to kick the mule for punishment in the ribs; the mule, nowise taken aback, returning the compliment, by essaying to kick his late rider anywhere, though without success. It might have been imagined, to see the artful feints and moves, that the mule was endowed with human reason. Tom was more than a match for him at last, though, for, slipping off his jacket, he threw it over the mule's head and held it there, confusing the poor beast, so that it could not avoid a couple of heartily given kicks in the ribs; and before it could recover from its surprise Tom was once more seated upon its back in triumph.

"I can stand a wonderful sight of kicking off, Mas'r

Harry, I can tell you! I ain't bet yet! Co-o-me on, will you!"

Apparently cowed, now that the jacket was removed, the mule journeyed on very peaceably, till leaving the plain we began to ascend a precipitous mountain side, the track each moment growing more and more sterile,—if it were possible—grand, and at the same time dangerous. And now it was that we began to see the qualities of the mules in the cautious way they picked their steps, feeling each loose piece of path before trusting their weight to it, and doing much towards removing a strange sensation of tremor evoked by the fact that we were progressing along a shelf of rugged rock some two feet wide—the scarped mountain side upon our right, a vast precipice on the left.

More than once I was for getting down to walk, but the guide dissuaded me, as he declared that it was far better to trust to the mules, who were never known to slip.

A couple of miles of such travelling served to somewhat reassure me—familiarity with danger breeding contempt; and I called out to Tom:

"I hope your beast won't bear malice, Tom, for this would be an awkward place for him to try his capers."

I said so thoughtlessly, just at a time when we were descending; Tom's beast, which was before me, walking along with the most rigorous care as to where he set his feet.

"Oh! I say, don't, Mas'r Harry," whined Tom, "don't! It's no joke, you know, and this mule understands every word you say—leastwise he might, you know. I ain't afraid, only he might—"

Tom's sentence was not finished; for, in fact, just as if every word I had uttered had been comprehended, down

went the beast's head, his heels were elevated, and the next moment, to my horror, poor Tom was over the side of the path, and rolling swiftly down to apparent destruction.

He was brought up, though, the next moment by the reins, which he tightly grasped, and which fortunately did not give way, though they tightened with a jerk that must have nearly dislocated the mule's neck. The leather, fortunately, now strained and stretched, but held firm; while, planting its fore-feet close to the edge of the precipice, and throwing its body back against the scarped wall, the mule stood firm as the rock itself, but snorting loudly as with glaring eyeballs it stared down at Tom; who hung there, trying to obtain some rest for his feet, but uttering no sound, only gazing up at us with a wild look that said plainly as could be, "Don't leave me here to die!"

It was no easy task to help him; for the guide and I had both to dismount on to a narrow ledge of rock, clinging the while to our mules; but we achieved that part of our task, and the next moment, one on each side of Juan, we were kneeling down and trying to reach Tom's hands.

But our efforts were vain, for the mule was in the way, and there was not standing room for all three. There was but one way of helping, and that looked too desperate to be attempted, and I hesitated to propose it as I knelt shivering there.

The same thought, though, had occurred to Tom, and in a husky voice he said:

"Take hold of the guide's hand, Mas'r Harry, and creep under the mule's legs to his side."

It was no time to hesitate; and I did as I was told, the mule giving utterance to quite a shriek as I passed.

"Now can you both reach the bridle?" Tom whispered.

"Yes, yes!" we both exclaimed.

"Hold on tight then, while one of you cuts it through, and then the mule will be out of the way."

We each took a good grip of the leathern thong, raising it so that we had Tom's full weight upon our muscles; and then crouching down so as not to be drawn over, I hastily drew out my knife, opened it with some difficulty by means of my teeth, and then tried to cut the bridle above our hands.

But feeling himself partly relieved of his burden, the mule began to grow restless, stamping, whinnying, and trying to get free. For a moment I thought we might utilize his power, and make him back and help draw Tom up; but the narrowness of the ledge forbade it, and he would only have been drawn sidewise till the rein broke.

Twice I tried to cut the bridle, but twice the mule balked me, and I was glad to ease the fearful strain on one arm by catching at the hand that held the knife.

"Try again, Mas'r Harry, please," whispered Tom. "I can't hang much longer."

With a desperate effort I cut at the rein, and divided it close to the mule's mouth.

He started back a few inches, tightening the other rein; but now, once more, I was grasping the rein with both hands lest it should slip through my fingers, and at the same moment the knife fell, striking Tom on the cheek and making the blood spurt out, before flying down—down to a depth that was horrible to contemplate.

It was a fearful time, and as I crouched there a cold sensation seemed to be creeping through the marrow of all my bones. We could not raise Tom for the mule, I could not cut the rein, and upon asking I found that the guide had no knife, and, what was worse, it was evident that he was losing nerve.

I dared not try to heave—it would have been madness, cumbered and crowded together as we were; and in those brief moments of agony it seemed to me that I was Tom's murderer, for, but on account of my wild thirst for coming abroad, he might have been safe at home.

"Try—try again, Mas'r Harry, please," whispered the poor fellow imploringly; "I shouldn't like to die out here in these savage parts, nor yet this how. Make one more try to get rid of that beast."

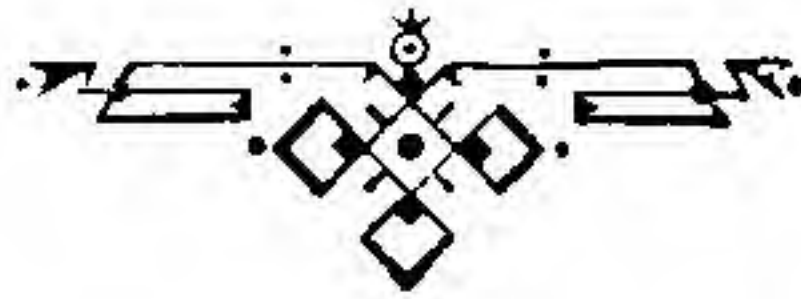
As if to show that he was not all bad, just at the moment when it seemed that all chance of saving poor Tom was gone, when our arms felt to be dragging out of their sockets, and a something drawing me by a strange fascination, joined to the weight, over the side of the precipice—the mule gave a wild squeal, shook its head for an instant, seized the tight rein in its teeth, and bit it through.

The next moment it gave a whinny of relief, planted its feet on my back as I half lay down, leaped over me, and was out of our way; while how we managed the next part I cannot say. All I know is that there was a horrible struggle, a scrambling rush, the panting groans of those who fought with grim death, and then I lay half-fainting upon the shelf, with honest old Tom at my side.

"Thank Heaven!" I muttered.

"Amen, Mas'r Harry!" said Tom in a whisper; and then for some time no one spoke.

Half an hour after, very quiet and sober of mien, we were leading our mules down the shelf, unnerved and trembling, till ~~once~~ more the plain was reached, and with it rest for the night.





CHAPTER X.

PLAYING AT HEROES.

AND so we journeyed on day after day, through heat and dust, and arid, stony lands; with my heart sinking lower and lower and the thought of home not being so very bad a place after all continually forcing itself upon me, till our guide suddenly announced our proximity to the place I had come these thousands of miles to seek. And now it was that from where it had sunk my heart gave a great leap of exultation, and I sat for long enough upon my bony mule drinking in the scene before me.

For the last three days our ride had been over stone and sand, with here and there a melancholy palm shooting up from the drab-hued desert, the sun beating down and being reflected up in a way that was almost unbearable; even Tom riding with his mouth open, panting like a dog, his face coated with perspiration and dust; while when at night we had stopped at some wretched makeshift of an inn—a hut generally where a grass hammock and a little lukewarm water was the total accommodation—a wash or bath of any kind had been quite out of the question. But now, as we were descending a steep mountain side, it seemed as if we had suddenly dropped

into one of the most lovely spots on earth, riding at once right in beneath the shade of a huge forest, with a sea of green leaves spreading out before us in every direction.

By comparison the coolness was delightful, and we rode through a vast arcade over a golden net-work spread by the sun upon the grassy undergrowth; whilst from afar off came that sweetest of sounds to a parched and thirsty traveller, the murmuring of falling water, now soft and gentle, now increasing to a roar.

"Great river, senors," said our guide, pointing forward. "Senor Don Reuben Landell on other side."

"Say, Mas'r Harry," said Tom just then, "they ain't sure where the Garden of Eden was, are they? I'm blest if I don't think we've found the very spot, and if——. There she goes!"

I can't say whether Tom's mind was running just then upon Eve, but as a light figure seemed to flit into our sight and stand gazing at us with bright and wondering eyes, mine did; and for a few minutes after she had disappeared amongst the trees I sat in my saddle without speaking.

But the glorious verdure around soon made me forget the fair vision; and now, riding on a few paces, now halting at an opening in the forest, I sat drinking in the scene with the feelings of one in a dream.

Then we rode on a hundred yards up an ascent, with the sun full upon us once more, to descend a precipitous path, holding on tightly by the mule, which one expected to slip and hurl one down a gulf at the side; but the descent was safely made, and then we stood gazing at a belt of cultivated ground—the forest and river lying off to our right.

"There is the river path, senors," said our guide, "straight down. The ground is soft and bad for the mules, and I go back. You will find a gentleman to take you over the great river; but I would look about me; there are little snakes, the great water-boas, and the crocodiles of the river."

Then saluting us with his half-bred Spanish politeness, our guide stood while we possessed ourselves of our light luggage, and then led off his mules, leaving us to follow the pointed-out direction, which took us down to the swampy bank of a great muddy river flowing gently by us, cutting its way, as it were, through a forest of mighty trees, whose tall stems shot up from the water's edge. There was a small canoe tethered to a sapling where the path ceased, but no sign of its owner; while half a mile in front, across the river, was an opening in the trees similar to that in which we stood, which was, doubtless, the path we were to pursue.

We stood in deep shadow; but the sun was flashing from the breast of the river as it rolled slowly on, its even surface unbroken save here and there by some water-bird; while in several places what seemed to be rough tree-trunks were floating slowly down with the stream. The great trees were wreathed and festooned to the water's edge with parasites and vines; and now and then the shrill cry of some parrot rang out, the bird flashing into sight for an instant, and then disappearing amidst the glorious verdure.

"Well, Tom," I said, "this is different from the old country."

But he did not reply; and turning, I found him gazing fixedly amongst the swamp herbage, through

which was a wet, muddy track, when, following the direction of his gaze and peering into the shade, I became aware of a pair of the most hideous, hateful eyes fixed upon me that I had ever seen. I was heated with walking over the wet ground, and there was a warm, steamy exhalation rising around; but in a moment my tongue became dry and a cold perspiration bedewed my limbs, as, fascinated almost, I stood gazing within six feet of the monster, which now began slowly a retrograde motion till the herbage hid it from our sight. Then there was a loud rustling rush, a splash in the water, and wave after wave proclaimed the size of the beast that had, fortunately for us, declined to attack.

"Whurra!" exclaimed Tom with a shudder. "Say, Mas'r Harry, do newts grow as big as that out here?"

"It was a crocodile, Tom," I said with a shiver. "And look—look! Why, the river swarms with them!"

"So it does, seemin'ly," exclaimed Tom as I pointed out the slimy backs of half-a-score of them floating down the stream; for I could see now that they were no trees, while here and there on the muddy bank we could make out a solitary monster basking, open-mouthed, in the sun.

"Come along," I said, "let's get over."

"But will they touch the boat, Mas'r Harry? I ain't afraid, you know, only they are queersome beasts as ever I did see."

"I don't think there's any fear of that," I said; "but at anyrate we must get over."

Stepping close to the water's edge I drew the light canoe up by its bark rope, disturbing either a small reptile or some great fish as I did so, for there was a

rushing swirl in the water and the frail vessel rocked to and fro.

In spite of Tom's declarations to the effect that such a pea-shuck would sink with us, I stepped in and he followed; when, taking the paddles, we pushed off and began to make our way out into the stream, Tom's eyes glancing around as he dipped in his paddle cautiously, expecting every moment that it would touch a crocodile; but using our paddles—clumsily enough, as may be supposed—we made some way, and then paused to consider whether we should go forward or backward, for we had at one and the same time arrived at the knowledge that the strong stream was our master, and that until we had attained to some skill in the use of the paddles any progress up stream towards the landing-place was out of the question.

"We must get across lower down, Tom," I said, "and then walk back."

"What! through the wood, Mas'r Harry?"

"Yes, through the wood."

"Lor! No, don't do that, Mas'r Harry. We shall be eat up alive! Them there woods swarms with snakes—I know they do. And just look there!" he cried, splashing fiercely with his paddle to frighten a huge reptile, but without effect; for the great beast came slowly floating down in all its native hideousness, its rugged bark-like back and the rough prominences above its eyes out of the muddy water, one eye peering at us with the baleful look peculiar to this fearful beast.

The next minute it had passed us, and we were once more paddling slowly on, the river having swept us quite out of sight of the landing-place. But the sights around

were so novel that I rather enjoyed our passage. In spite of Tom's anxiety, every now and then I ceased paddling to gaze at some bright-plumaged bird flitting from tree to tree overhanging the stream. Once I made sure that the great bare vine which swung between two boughs must be a serpent, till, passing by, we made out its real character.

At last, though, I awoke to the fact that it was time to be up and doing, for the current had swept us round a great bend of the river, and below us I saw that for a wide stretch of quite a couple of miles the river was broken up by rapids. Great masses of rock thrust their bare heads out of the water like river monsters, and round them the muddy tide bubbled, and foamed, and eddied.

It was plain enough that we were approaching a dangerous part, and had not our sense warned us of the peril we had ample warning in the increased swiftness and troubled state of the stream. I saw at a glance that a boat would have but a poor chance of existing amongst the rocky way if it should be swept there, and I had taken a firm grip of my paddle when—

“Look, Tom!” I cried.

And for a moment our attention was taken up by one of those glorious golden-green and scarlet birds—the trogons—flitting close by us, its emerald crest and gorgeous yard-long tail-feathers flashing in the sun, while its brilliant scarlet breast was for a moment reflected in the water.

“Oh, you beauty!” cried Tom. “If I only had my old gun! But, I say, Mas'r Harry, paddle away!”

Already somewhat more used to the propellers, we began to force the boat towards the opposite bank, hop-

ing to get into an eddy that should help us along; but we had dallied with our task, and the stream now ran more swiftly than ever. Still we made some progress, and were contriving to dip together, when I almost let my paddle pass from my hands, for a strange, wild cry rang along the surface of the water.

"What's that?" I exclaimed.

"I should say it was one of them pleasant brutes out for a holiday—one of them tiger or leopard things, like what we used to see in Wombwell's show, like great tom-cats. I'll lay a wager this is the spot where they live when they're at home and go yowling about."

"There it is again!" I exclaimed excitedly. "Why, it was a cry for help. There is some one in the river!"

"Then he'd better hold his tongue," said Tom, "and not get shouting, or he'll have all these great beasts come rushing at him, same as they did in the ponds at home when we used to throw in a worm upon a bent pin and fish for the little newts. There, Mas'r Harry, look at that chap!"

As he spoke Tom pointed with his paddle at a great uncouth monster, some twelve feet long and tremendously thick, which had raised its head from the slime in which it wallowed upon the edge of the river, and was slowly turning itself, first in one and then in another direction, before splashing a little and then shooting itself off into deep water with one stroke of its powerful tail.

"Ugh, the brutes!" ejaculated Tom. "They'd make short work of a fellow if he was thrown in for live bait. But, I say, that is some one shouting, Mas'r Harry."

"Paddle down closer towards the rapids, Tom," I said excitedly.

Then, for a moment we forgot our own danger as with a sharp stroke or two we sent the canoe out in full stream, so that it swept down swiftly.

"You're right, Mas'r Harry—you're right!" said Tom, eager now as I was myself. "Look—look, there's a canoe upset!"

"Paddle away!" I cried as another shout came ringing towards us, just as I obtained a good view of what was taking place below.

"But we shall be over too, Mas'r Harry, if you row like that. Lord help them, though, if there ain't a woman in the water!" Tom cried, working his paddle furiously—an example I had set him.

Swaying about, the little vessel raced almost through the troubled waters, which each moment grew more rough, leaping and dancing, and threatening at times to splash right into our frail boat.

Our excitement was pardonable, for right in front of us, and about two hundred yards down the river, there was a sight which made my nerves tingle, and the paddle in my hands to feel like a straw. A canoe of about double the size of our own had been upset in the rapids, and, with four figures clinging to it, was rapidly floating down stream amidst the boiling waters, which leaped and seethed round them. Now we could see that two of the figures were making efforts to turn the canoe; but it was evident that in the rough water, and with the others clinging to it, this was impossible; and, evidently half-strangled and bewildered in the fierce rush, they had given up the next minute, and were clinging to the vessel's sides.

Now it was hurried down a rapid with a tremendous

rush, to be tossing the next moment in the deep below, whirling round and round, now half under, now by its buoyancy rising again with its clinging freight, to be swept into an eddy where the water was comparatively calm, but only to be slowly driven back again into the swift current hastening down the rocky slope; and a groan of dismay burst from my breast as I saw the boat dashed against a great black jagged mass of rock right in its way. But the next instant the party had glided round it, and were again being swept downwards where the river was one mass of creamy foam.

How we went down I cannot tell you, for it was due to no skill on our part; the wonder is that we were not over-set a score of times; but somehow, almost miraculously, we seemed to avoid rock after rock that was scattered in our way, the little canoe bounding along in a mad race as we plied our paddles with all the energy at our command. I have often thought since that our rough action and chance-work way of running the gauntlet amidst the rocks was the reason of our success, where skilled managers of a canoe would have come to grief; but, be that as it may, in a wild exciting race we dashed on and on down the gradual watery slope, the noise of many waters thundering in our ears, while, with what I believe is the true generous spirit of an Englishman pervading us, we forgot our own danger in the sight of that incurred by the party in the rapids.

“Go it, Mas’r Harry!” Tom roared, mad almost with excitement, as he scooped away with his paddle. “Hurraw! Who’s afraid? That’s a good un! Now again! Brayvo! lay into it, my hearty!”

We gained upon the upset boat swiftly, when, as the

clinging party were swept into a tolerably smooth reach that intervened between a fierce race of water and the next dangerous spot, I saw one of the men leave the canoe and strike boldly out for the shore, followed directly after by two more, whose dusky skin proclaimed them of Indian blood.

“Why, only look there—three men and one woman!” cried Tom. “And if they haven’t gone away and left her! This ain’t old England, Mas’r Harry; we don’t do things that how at home. Paddle away! Mind, sir, or you’ll have us over! Only wish I had a couple of tallow staves instead of this wooden spoon. Paddle away, sir! Cowardly warmint! That’s it, sir; this boat’s as light as a cork, but don’t have us over. We shall soon reach her now—mind, steady, for I’m scared to death of the water, and I wouldn’t swim as they do, not for a thousand pounds—not but what I could if I liked. That’s it, sir, only another thirty yards—long strokes and steady ones, and—hold on, my dear, we’re coming.”

“Push on, Tom—push on, and save your breath,” I cried, “for Heaven’s sake! Ah!—”

I could not restrain that cry—it burst from my lips, for just at that moment I saw the female figure, yet clinging to the overturned canoe, glide from her hold, as if drawn away by some invisible agency down, down, gradually beneath the swift tide.

“It’s one of them great wild beasts got her!” cried Tom, giving vent to the thought that had flashed across my brain. “Oh! don’t—pray, pray don’t, Mas’r Harry!” I heard him shriek. “I’m scared to death of these waters, and if you go I must too, for I swore I’d stick to you like a—Oh, Mas’r Harry!”

With Tom's voice ringing in my ears, but having no more effect than they would have had in staying the swift rush of the rapids, I had in one and the same moment recognized the drowning face, and, paddle in hand, leaped from the frail canoe into the foaming river.

That was a wild and thrilling moment, when, nerving myself to the encounter, I battled with the fierce water, trying to put into practice every feint and feat that I had learned in old bathing times at home, when sporting in the summer evenings in our little river. Speed, though, and skill in swimming seemed unavailing here, as I felt the waters wreath round me, strangling me, as it were, in a cold embrace; then seizing me to drag me here, to drag me there; dashing me against this rock, against that, and directly after sending a cold chill of horror through every nerve, as a recollection of the hideous reptiles abounding in the river flashed upon me, when I felt myself sucked down lower and lower in the vortex of some eddy between the rocks. It was like dreaming of swimming in some horrible nightmare, my every effort being checked when I strove to reach the drowning girl; and again and again, when just on the point of clutching her light garments, I was swept away, to begin once more fighting towards her with the energy of despair.

At last, however, my arm was round her, and two little hands closed upon my shoulders, clinging to me with a despairing grip, as I fought hard to keep on the surface; but only to be swept here and there, helpless as a fragment of wood, the muddy water the while thundering in my ears and bubbling angrily at my lips.

Now up, now down—over, and over, and over, rolling along a shallow smooth platform of rock, and then into

deeper water again. I began to feel that I was fighting my last fight, and that the enemy was too strong.

But still I fought on—more feebly, 'tis true, but still with the stubborn determination of an unworthy representative of that nation which was said by a great general not to know when they were beaten.

Then came a respite, as I was swept into still water; but I was too weak now to take advantage of it before I was borne into the next rapid, foaming to receive me with my burden.

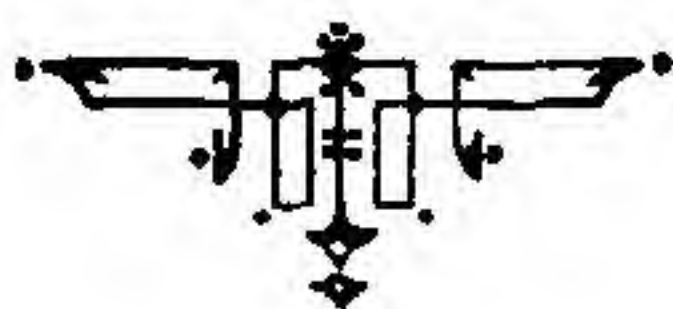
The river was here like a series of long rugged steps, with here fierce tumbling waters, there a smooth interval, but only to be succeeded again and again by broken water, into another foaming chaos of which I was swept.

It was now one wild confusion of struggling wave and roaring, foaming surf; then came a dim sense that I was half stunned by a fierce blow—that I was growing weaker—that I was drowning fast; and for an instant a pang shot through me as I seemed to see vividly a portion of my past life, and thought of how hard it was to die so young.

I was again swept into the still water, and my arm struck out involuntarily as, my lips well above water, I drew in a long breath—a long invigorating draught of the breath of life; but my efforts were feeble, and my mind was misty and confused, but only for a few moments. In a flash, as it were of light, the horror of my position came upon me, and I gave utterance to a cry of terror, for suddenly there was a fierce rushing swirl in the water. I felt something strike me obliquely; then the light figure I had striven so hard to save was almost jerked from my arm, and the next instant we were being

borne swiftly along through the water up-stream and towards the shore.

Jerk, jerk, jerk! and I gazed with horror upon the pale face close to mine, fortunately insensible; my eyes seemed ready to start from their sockets with horror; there was a sensation as of a ghostly hand stirring my wet hair; and then once more I gave utterance to a strange hoarse cry that startled even me; for as—in spite of my weakness—my mental energies grew momentarily clearer I thoroughly realized the horror of our position, and that we were being dragged rapidly away by one of the ravenous reptiles of the river.





CHAPTER XI.

IN THE WOODS.

DEATH, we are told, has been met by the brave-hearted again and again unflinchingly; but such a death as was now threatening me and the poor girl I was trying to save must have made the stoutest blench. For my part, a chill of horror seemed to pass through every limb, thoroughly unnerving me, so that my efforts were but feeble as I felt myself sweeping through the water towards the bank, where the stream ran swiftly, but free of rocks, while its eddies and whirlpools showed that there were holes and places worn in beneath the banks, to one of which it seemed evident the monster was making.

I made one desperate struggle, as, nearing the bank, the water shallowed; but the slight figure was still dragged swiftly onward, while twice over I felt the rough slimy body of the monster in contact with my legs. All defence or attack—all prospect of escape, seemed out of the question, and by the action of the water I was turned over helplessly upon my back, the muddy stream flowing over my face half-strangling me. I had during the last few moments been fast approaching to a dreamy state, which dulled the acute horror of my

position, and I believe that a few more moments would have produced insensibility, when I was galvanized, as it were, back into vigorous action by a sound as something grazed my shoulder.

“Now, then, hold fast by the side—hold fast!” was shrieked in my ears as a hand grasped mine, guiding it to the edge of the canoe, to which I clung with renewed energy as we were racing through the shallows at a tremendous rate. Then came a shouting, and the vigorous beating of the water with a paddle, a tremendous rushing swirl, which nearly overset the canoe, and our locomotion was at an end, the vessel floating lightly in a deep pool beneath the trees. A few strokes of the paddle and the prow struck the muddy bank; and before I could recover from the prostration I felt myself dragged on to the grass, and my arm roughly torn from the waist it so tightly encircled; but not before I had seen that the clinging garments were torn—rent down one side, evidently where the huge beast had seized its prey; and then there was the muttering of voices, the rustling of the undergrowth as a passage was forced through it, and we were alone.

“I’d have said thanky for a good deal less than that, if it had been me,” said Tom gruffly, as he stood gazing after the retreating party. “They’re a nice lot, Mas’r Harry—swam off like a set of copper-skinned varmints, and left the gal to drownd; and when some one else has the pluck to save her, they look savage and disappointed, and snatch her away just as if they were recovering stolen goods. My eye, though, Mas’r Harry, it was a narrer escape—worse than swinging under that old donkey’s nose!”

My only reply was a shudder.

"I didn't think it so precious bad, Mas'r Harry, when we was up at that landing-place in the ship; but I do think now as we're getting it rather warm: only ashore here a few days, and we've had our lodging shook about our ears; I've been pitched over a precipice like the side of a house; and you've been a'most swallowed and drowned by a great newt. I'll give in. It is a trifle hotter than it was at home. But say, Mas'r Harry, it ain't going to be all in this style, is it? Why it's like being heroes in a book—Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday, and all on in that tune, and us not knowing how much hotter we're going to have it!"

"Matter of chance, Tom," I said, wringing the water from my clothes as I stood in the hot sun. "We may be here for years and have no more adventures. Perhaps, after so rough a welcome, matters may turn out gloriously."

Tom began to whistle and pick leaves to chew and spit out again, till I pronounced my readiness to proceed.

"Paddles are both in the boat," said Tom, then, as he secured the canoe by its bark rope to a tree, "we've got over the river, Mas'r Harry, that's one thing; but how far we are down below the landing-place I dunno, I'm sure."

We proved to be much farther below than I thought for, enough time elapsing for my clothes to get nearly dry in the patches of hot sun we passed as we wound our way through the forest, the rushing noise of the river on our right guiding us in our efforts to keep within range of the bank, which we avoided on account of the huge beasts we had seen basking there.

"This is a rum sort of country and no mistake, Mas'r Harry," said Tom at last, as he stood mopping the perspir-

ation from his face; "but, somehow or other, one feels just the same here as one did in the old place, and I'm as hungry now as if I hadn't had a morsel to eat for a week. Is it much farther, Mas'r Harry?"

"I don't know how many miles we've come," I replied.

But his words had fully accounted for a strange sensation of faintness that troubled me. A little more perseverance, though, brought us to the track—one that we might have reached in a quarter of the time had we known the way.

A short walk showed us that we were correct, for we went along the track to the river, so as to make sure of this being the one we sought—for being lost in these wilds was something not to be thought of for a minute. There, though, on the other side of the stream, was the landing-place from which we had started, only to reach our present position after a roundabout eventful journey.

"All right, Mas'r Harry—come along," said Tom, turning.

And now, pursuing the track, we found that we were gradually mounting a slope, till the trees were left behind and we stood upon an eminence looking down upon my uncle's house.

All that we had seen beautiful before seemed to fail before the picture upon which we now gazed, where all that was lavish in nature had been aided by the hand of man, cultivation subduing and enriching, till the region below us blushed in beauty; for we were looking down upon a lightly-built, pleasantly-shaded house, with its green jalousie-covered windows, and great creeper-burdened verandah, gaily painted, and running right round the house.

The place stood in the midst of a grove of verdure of the most glorious golden green, rich with the great crimson, coral-like blossoms of what is there called *madre del cacao*—the cocoa's mother—tall, regularly planted trees, cultivated for the protection and shade they give to the plants beneath, great bananas loaded with fruit, bright green coffee bushes, and the cocoa with its pods, green, yellow, blood-red, and purple. The roughly erected fences were, so to speak, smothered with glorious trumpet-blossomed convolvuli, whose bright hues were peering ever from a bed of heart and spear shaped richly green leaves.





CHAPTER XII.

THE HACIENDA.

CLEAR and bright was the sky, and wherever the rays of the sun penetrated it was for them to fall in a shower of golden arrows, and form tracery upon the green carpet beneath the trees, amid whose branches, screaming, chattering, climbing, and hanging head downwards, or fluttering from bough to bough, were hundreds of rainbow-hued parrots, beautiful as Nature's dyes could paint.

It was a scene of exceeding beauty, and was not lost even upon blunt, hungry Tom.

"Well," he exclaimed, "if this don't pay for coming out, may I never again wire out a bar of best mottled. It's a rum sort of country though; one time frightening you to death, and the next minute coaxing you into staying. S'pose, Mas'r Harry, that there's a sort of foreign market-garden?"

"If I'm not mistaken, Tom, that's my uncle's plantation."

"With all my heart, Mas'r Harry; but choked as I am with thirst I should like one of them pumpkins or some of the other outlandish fruits. Let's have a pen'orth, sir. My! what a sight though! I hope this is the spot. But there, only look, Mas'r Harry, did you ever see such

sparrows? Look at the colour of 'em! If I don't take home a cageful, and one of them red and yaller poll-parrots, I don't stand here now. But are you sure your uncle Reuben lives here, Mas'r Harry?"

"I think this must be the spot, Tom," I said, "according to the guide's description."

"Why, he must be quite a lord, sir. He's never touched taller or soap in his life, I'll bet. But, say, Mas'r Harry, we look rough uns to go and see him, don't us?"

I laughed and then led the way, Tom following close behind, till we entered a sort of court-yard surrounded by sheds, with men and women busily at work at what I afterwards learned was the preparation of the cocoa.

"And you're Harry Grant then, are you?" said a tall, brown-skinned man, who was pointed out to me as the owner of the place, and who, upon my introducing myself, received me with a hearty English grip of the hand. "Hang it, my lad, it brings old times back to see a face fresh from home! You're your mother's boy plain enough. But come in, and welcome, my lad, though we have been in a bit of a stew; my girl upset in a canoe and half drowned; but the gentleman with her saved her. She's not much the worse for it, though."

I turned round hastily and just in time to stop Tom, who was about to blurt out the whole affair, for I thought it better to be silent, I hardly knew why, my mind being just then in a state of confusion, it being rather startling to find that I had probably been the means of saving the life of my own cousin; though why the gentleman who was with her—whoever he might be—should have the credit of what Tom and I had done, I did not know.

Anyhow, I was to be beneath the same roof, and I thought matters would come right in the end.

My uncle led the way into a cool half-darkened room, where I was introduced to an aunt, of whose existence I was not aware, inasmuch as she was the lately married widow of a neighbouring planter. Then I heard my uncle say:

“Not lying down, Lill? All right again? Glad of it! Well, this is a cousin for you, and I hope you will be good friends.”

I hardly know what I did or said just then; for timidly coming forward out of the shade, I saw the fair vision of the morning, but now deadly pale—the maiden whom a couple of hours before I had rescued from so horrible a death. She was dressed in a simple muslin, and her long fair hair, yet clammy and damp, was tied with a piece of blue ribbon, and hung down her shoulders. It was the same sweet English face that might be seen in many a country home far away in our northern islands; but out there, in that tropic land, with its grand scenery and majestic vegetation, she seemed to me, in spite of her pallor, to be fairy-like and ethereal; and for a while, as I thought of the events of a short time before—events in which she was unconscious that I had played a somewhat important part—I was blundering and awkward, and unable to say more than a few of the commonest words of greeting.

I have no doubt that they all thought me an awkward clumsy oaf, and I must have looked it; but I was suddenly brought to myself by my uncle's voice and the sight of a pair of eyes.

“Harry,” said my uncle, performing the ceremony of

introduction, Mr.—(I beg his pardon) Don—Don Pablo Garcia, a neighbour of mine—the gentleman who just saved Lilla's life. Garcia, my nephew—my sister's son—from old England.”

Instinctively I held out my hand, and the next moment it was clasping something cold and damp and fishlike. A few words in English passed, but they were muttered mechanically, and for a few moments, each apparently unable to withdraw his hand, we two stood looking in each other's eyes, my expression—if it was a true index of my heart—being that of wonder and distrust; for I seemed again, for the first time in my life, to be undergoing a new series of sensations. I knew in that instant of time that I was gazing into the eyes of a deadly enemy—of a man who, for self-glorification, had arrogated to himself the honour of having saved Lilla's life, probably under the impression that we, being strangers, were bound down the river, and would never again turn up to contradict him. What he had said, how much he had taken upon himself, or how much had been laid upon him through the lying adulations of his Indian servants, I do not know; but I was conscious of an intense look of hatred and dislike—one that was returned by a glance of contempt which made his teeth slightly grate together, though he tried to conceal all by a snake-like smile as he recovered himself, and, seeking a way out of his difficulty, exclaimed:

“The senor and I have met before: he helped me to save our woodland flower from the river.”

“Indeed! my dear Harry!” exclaimed my uncle, catching my disengaged hand in his, while by an effort I dragged the other away from Garcia's cold clutch, his

eyes fixing mine the while, and seeming to say, "Be careful, or I'll have your life!"—mine, if they could speak a language that he could interpret, plainly saying, "You cowardly hound, you left her to perish!"

"It was nothing on my part, Uncle," I said quietly. "Nothing but what any fellow from the old country would have done."

The next moment Mrs. Landell, my new aunt, had thrown her arms round my neck. Formality of greeting was at an end, and, with tears in her eyes, she thanked me and welcomed me to the hacienda.

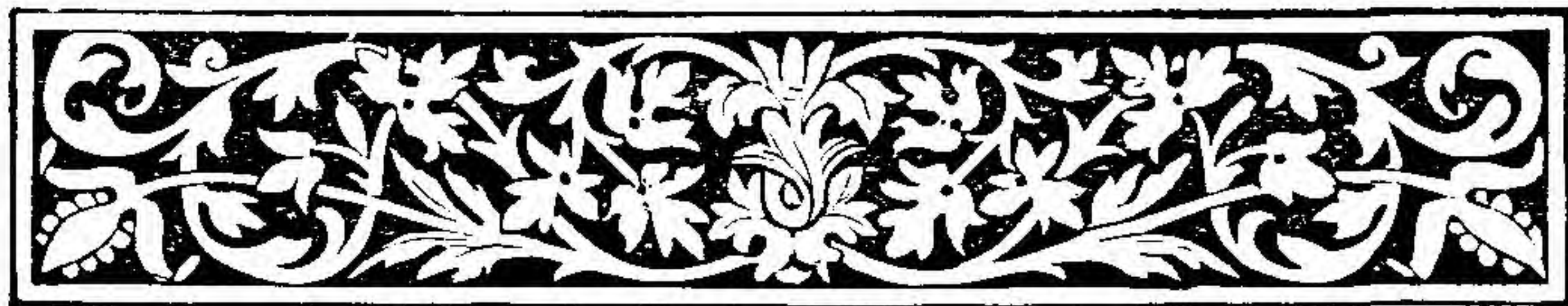
I was longing for the scene to be at an end, for I was growing troubled and confused, when once more the tell-tale blood swept into my face, as I blushed like a great girl; for Lilla came up, and with the colour mantling, too, in her pale cheeks, thanked me for what I had done.

It was some few minutes before I was sufficiently cool and collected to have a good look at Garcia, when I found him to be a tall, well-shaped, and swarthy young fellow, about five years my senior. He was handsome, but there was a sinister look about his dark eyes, and, in spite of his effeminacy, his lithe limbs betokened great strength. An instinctive feeling of dislike, though, kept growing upon me, although there was a pleasant smile, and a display of regular white teeth, which he turned upon me every time he encountered my eyes, as he lounged about smoking a cigar, whose fragrance betokened its origin. He was easy of mien, well-dressed, and evidently at home there; while by contrast I was shabby, travel-stained, and awkward.

I disliked him at first, because I knew him to be a cur and a liar; but soon—ay, before ten minutes had elapsed—

I knew why my instinctive dislike was increasing every moment we were together. I learned why we were to be enemies to the end; for after smoking some time in silence, listening the while with smiling face to my uncle's questions concerning home—questions which I answered clumsily, growing each moment more put out and annoyed; for it seemed to me that Garcia's smiles were pitying, and that he was comparing his grace with my awkwardness—he rose, crossed over to Lilla, who was seated, took her hand in his as if it belonged to him of right, raised it to his lips, and then, with a smiling farewell to all present, he whispered a few words to my cousin, gave me—his lips smiling the while—a sharp meaning look from between his half-closed eyelids, and then his figure darkened for an instant the sunshine streaming in at the door, and he was gone.





CHAPTER XIII.

ALL IS NOT GOLD THAT GLITTERS.

“**W**ELL, lad,” said my uncle, when, refreshed by a pleasant bath and a glass or two of goodly wine with the meal spread for me, I sat with him in the shaded room, my aunt—a pleasant, comely, Englishwoman—seated with her daughter, working by one of the open windows—“well, lad, people don’t come a four or five thousand miles’ journey on purpose to pay visits. What have you got in your eye?”

“Frankly, Uncle,” I said, “I don’t know. I could not rest at home, and felt that I must go abroad; and now I must say that I am glad of my resolution.”

I thought at first, as I was speaking, of the beautiful scenery, but in the latter part of my speech I was looking towards Lilla, and for a moment our eyes met.

My uncle shook his head as I finished speaking.

“Soap-boiling isn’t a pleasant trade, Harry,” he said; “but as the old saying goes, ‘Dirty work brings clean money.’ There’s always been a comfortable home for you, hasn’t there?”

“Yes, Uncle,” I said impatiently.

“And plenty to eat, and drink, and wear?”

"Yes, Uncle."

"And your father kept you at good schools till you were seventeen or eighteen?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"Then—it's plain speaking, but I must give it to you, Harry—you were a young fool to leave it all. You were like the dog with the shadow, you've dropped a good mouthful of meat to grasp at nothing. You'd have done better sticking to the soap."

"I couldn't, Uncle," I exclaimed.

"Ah! that's what all you young donkeys say. Only to think of it—throwing up the chance of a good, sure trade!"

"But, my dear uncle, I was so unsuited for it, though I am ready enough to work. If you can give me employment, pray do so, for do not think I have come to be a burden to you."

"My dear boy," he said gravely, "I don't think anything of the sort. You are welcome here; and we owe you, it seems, the life of our dear child, though what your share was in saving her I don't know. Don't think, though, that we are not glad to see you. There," he said, laughing, "there's your aunt ready again to throw her arms around your neck, you see."

Mrs. Landell had dropped her work and crossed over to lay her hand upon my shoulder, while there was a tear—one bright, gem-like tear of gratitude—sparkling in Lilla's eye as she looked up timidly from her work, and that stupid young heart of mine gave a tremendous thump against my chest.

There was a pause then for a few minutes, when, in a thick, husky voice, I once more tried to speak.

“I’m sure,” I said, “your welcome is warmer than I deserve; and indeed, Uncle, I wish to be no burden to you. If you would rather not employ me, say so frankly; but perhaps you might, all the same, put me in the way of getting on as you have done.”

“As I have done!” he said laughing. “I see, my dear boy, you look at things with just the same eyes that I did when I came over years ago. It’s a lovely country, isn’t it, Harry?”

“Glorious!” I cried excitedly.

“Yes,” he said sadly; “glorious as the gilded frame of a mirror, all lustre and brightness, while underneath it is composition, and wood, and ill-smelling glue. Why, my dear boy, I am only living from hand to mouth. This looks, of course, all very bright and beautiful to you, and a wonderful contrast to hazy, foggy, cold old England—Heaven bless it! But fireflies, and humming-birds, and golden sunshine, and gaily-painted blossoms are not victuals and drink, Harry; and, besides, when you set to and earn your victuals and drink, you don’t know but what they will all be taken away from you. We’ve no laws here, my lad, worth a rush. We’re a patriotic people here, with a great love of our country—we Spanish, half-bred republican heroes,” he said bitterly, “and we love that country so well, Harry, that we are always murdering and enriching it with the blood of its best men. It might be a glorious place, but man curses it, and we are always having republican struggles, and bloodshed, and misery. We are continually having new presidents, here, my lad; and after being ruined three times, burned out twice, and saving my life by the skin of my teeth, the bright flowers and great green leaves seem to be powdered with ashes, and

I'd gladly, any day, change this beautiful place, with its rich plantations, for fifty acres of land in one of the shires at home."

"But don't you take rather a gloomy view of it all, Uncle?" I said, as I looked at him curiously.

But to my great discomfiture he burst out laughing, for he had read my thoughts exactly.

"My liver is as sound as yours, Harry, my boy," he said; "and I don't believe that there's a heartier man within fifty miles. No, my lad, I'm not jaundiced. There's no real prosperity here. The people are a lazy, loafing set, and never happy but when they are in hot water. There's the old, proud hidalgo blood mixed up in their veins; they are too grand to work—too lazy to wash themselves. There isn't a decent fellow in the neighbourhood, except one, and his name is Garcia—eh, Lill?" he said, laughing.

Lilla's face crimsoned as she bent over her work, while a few minutes after she rose and whispered to Mrs. Landell.

"You must excuse me, Harry," said my aunt, rising. "Lilla is unwell; the shock has been too much for her."

The next moment I was alone with my uncle, who proceeded in the same bitter strain:

"Yes, my lad, commerce is all nohow here—everything's sluggish, and I cannot see how matters are to mend. I'm glad to see you—heartily glad you have come. Stay with us a few months if you are determined upon a colonial life; see all you can of the country and judge for yourself; but Heaven forbid that I should counsel my sister's child to settle in such a revolutionary place!"

I was not long in finding out the truth of my uncle's words. The place was volcanic, and earthquakes of no

uncommon occurrence; but Nature in the soil was not one half as bad as Nature in the human race—Spanish half-blood and Indian—with which she had peopled the region, for they were, to a man, stuffed with explosive material, which the spark of some speaker's language was always liable to explode.

But I was delighted with the climate, in spite of the heat; and during the calm, cool evenings, when the moon was glancing through the trees, bright, pure, and silvery, again and again I thought of how happy I could be there but for one thing.

That one thing was not the nature of the people nor their revolutionary outbursts, for I may as well own that commerce or property had little hold upon my thoughts until I found how necessary the latter was for my success. My sole thought in those early days, and the one thing that troubled me, was the constant presence of my uncle's wealthy neighbour, Pablo Garcia.

It was plain enough that he had been for months past a visitor, and that he had been looked upon as a suitor for Lilla's hand; but I could not discover whether she favoured him or no, for after meeting him a few times his very presence, with his calm, supercilious treatment of one whom he evidently hated from the bottom of his soul, was so galling to me, that upon his appearance I used to go out and ramble away for hours together, seeking the wilder wooded parts, and the precipitous spurs of the mountains, climbing higher and higher, till more than once in some lonely spot I came upon some trace of a bygone civilization—ruined temple, or palace of grand proportions, but now overthrown and crumbling into dust, with the dense vegetation of the region springing up

around, and in many places so covering it that it was only by accident that I discovered, in the darkened twilight of the leafy shade, column or mouldering wall, and then sat down to wonder and try and think out of the histories of the past who were the people that had left these traces of a former grandeur, and then over some carven stone light would spring to my understanding—a light that brought with it a thrill of hope. Then I would return, as night threatened to hide the track, back to my uncle's, to be treated coldly, as I thought, by Lilla, while more than once it seemed that my uncle gazed upon me in a troubled way.





CHAPTER XIV.

TOM SPEAKS HIS MIND.

A COUPLE of months soon glided away—a time of mingled misery and pleasure. At one time I was light-hearted and happy, at another low-spirited and depressed; for I could not see that there was the slightest prospect of my hopes ever bearing fruit. I was growing nervous, too, about Garcia; not that I feared him, but his manner now betokened that he bore me ill-will of the most intense character.

As for Lilla, the longer I was at the hacienda the more plain it became that she feared him, shuddering at times when he approached—tokens of dislike that made his eyes flash, and for which it was very evident that he blamed me.

But his blame was unjust; he had credited me with having made known the cowardly part he had played on the river; but though my uncle and aunt were ignorant of it, the news reached Lilla's ears, the medium being Tom Bulk.

Tom had settled down very comfortably at the hacienda, taking to smoking and hanging about the plantation sheds, and doing a little here or there as it pleased him, but none the less working very hard; and many a time I

had come across him glistening with perspiration as he tugged at some heavy bag with all an Englishman's energy when all around were sluggishly looking on. He studiously avoided the woods, though, save when he saw me off upon a ramble; and it was one day when I was standing by Lilla's side at an open window, previous to taking a long walk, that our attention was taken up by high words in the yard close at hand.

That Tom was one of the actors was plain enough, for his words came loud, clear, and angry to where we stood; and it was evident that he was taking the part of one of the Indian girls, who was weeping, probably from blows inflicted by one of her countrymen, whose gallantry is not proverbial.

"You red varmint," cried Tom fiercely, "I'll let you know what's what! We don't strike women in our country—no, not even if they hit us."

Interested as I was, the recollection of a sharp slap I had heard at home would come to my memory.

"And I tell you what, if you touch her again I'll make that face of yours a prettier colour than it is now."

"Pray go and tell my father," whispered Lilla anxiously. "Quarrels here are very serious sometimes, and end in loss of life."

Crack! There was the sound of a blow followed by a woman's shriek of pain.

"Why, you cowardly hound!" I heard Tom shout. "You dare hit *her*, then—you who sneaked off along with your grand Spanish Don when the boat was upset, and left young miss to drown! You're a brave one, you are, and then you all go and take the credit, when it was my

Mas'r Harry who saved her. Take that, you beggar, and that—and that!”

Tom's words were accompanied by the sounds of heavy blows; and on leaping out of the window I came upon him, squaring away, and delivering no meanly-planted blows upon the chests and faces of a couple of Indians, while a woman crouched, trembling and weeping, and writhing with pain, upon the ground.

“That's a settler for you anyhow!” said Tom, as he sent one of his adversaries staggering back for a few yards, to fall heavily, when the other retreated, but only for both to out with a knife each, and again come forward to the attack.

But my appearance upon the scene stayed them, and they slunk scowling away.

“I'll knock the wind out of some on 'em, Mas'r Harry, spite of their knives,” cried Tom excitedly. “I'll let 'em know how an Englishman serves them that knocks women about. Hit her with a great thick stick, he did—cuss him! I'll let him know!”

“Be quiet, Tom! Are you mad?” I said, catching him by the collar, for he was squaring away at the Indians, who were a couple of dozen yards away.

“What did he go knocking her about for? Yah! Mas'r Harry, they're a rotten lot out here, and the country's a thousand times too good for them!”

By degrees I got Tom cooled down, and into the house, and on returning I found Lilla standing watching for me at the window, but only to gaze at me with a strange, troubled look, half pain, half pleasure, and before I could speak she had fled.

But an hour had not passed before I came upon her

again, speaking anxiously to Tom. They did not see me approach, and as I was close up I was just in time to hear Tom exclaim:

“But he did, Miss, and stuck to you when all the rest had got ashore—the Don and all.”

Lilla gave a faint shriek as I spoke; and then darting at me a look of reproach, she hurried away, leaving me excited and troubled; for she had learned a secret that I had intended should not come to her ears.

“How dare you go chattering about like that?” I cried fiercely to Tom, for I was anxious to have some one to blame.

“Don’t care, Mas’r Harry,” he said sulkily. “Miss Lilla asked me, and I never told her only the truth. They are a cowardly set of hounds, the whole lot of ’em; and I’ll take any couple of ’em, one down and t’other come on, with a hand tied behind me.”

“We shall have to go, Tom,” I said bitterly. “What with your brawls and the mischief you have made, this will be no place for us.”

I spoke with gloomy forebodings in my mind, for I could not but think that trouble was to be our lot. Poor and without prospects, and with a rich and favoured rival, what was I to hope for? Indeed I felt ready to despair.

“Say, Mas’r Harry,” said Tom penitently, “’tain’t so bad as that, is it?”

“Bad! Yes, Tom,” I said gloomily, and I turned and left him.

It was a day or two after. I had only seen Lilla at meals, to find her shy and *distracte*. She hardly seemed to notice me, but I had the satisfaction of seeing that Garcia fared no better.

But he smiled pleasantly, evidently to conceal the rage that burned within him, and more than once there was a hateful glare in his eye that evidently boded no good to those who crossed his path ; and it seemed as if I had not only crossed his path, but now stood right in his way.

We had just finished the mid-day meal. Garcia had been with us, and on Lilla rising he had followed her to the door ; but she had turned from him with a look of contempt, when, white with passion, he had been unable to control himself, but dashed out of the place, muttering fiercely.

My uncle had seen all, and his countenance lowered, but for a while he did not speak. He walked to a closet, took out a cigar, and sat smoking till Mrs. Landell had left the room, when, beckoning me to him, he pointed to a chair, and then, as soon as I was seated, he gave utterance to what was in his mind.

“Harry, my lad,” he said, “I am a plain, straightforward fellow, and I like frankness. I’m going now to speak very plainly to you, for I’m not blind. You’ve taken a fancy to little Lill.”

I rose, holding by the back of my chair, blushed, blundered, and then stood without a word.

“I see I am right,” he said coolly. “But look here, Hal. I can’t call to mind a single dishonourable act committed by a member of either of the families from which you sprang. Now listen to me : have you ever said a word—you know what I mean—to Lilla ?”

“Oh, no, Uncle !” I exclaimed warmly.

“Quite right, my lad—quite right, for it would not do. You see, Hal, she has money in her own right, and you are not worth twopence. The girl is in my care. I hold

her from her relations, as it were, in trust; and it seems to me that it would be like taking advantage of my position if I encouraged anything between her and a poor relative of my own. You'll have to go away, Harry, unless you can make me a promise, and keep to it."

"What am I to promise?" I said gloomily; for he had ceased speaking; and I began to realize what going away meant. "What am I to promise?" I said again.

"Promise me, as a man of honour, that you will not in any way take advantage of your position here."

"Is it likely," I said bitterly, "when I am not worth twopence, and there is some one else in the field?"

"Don't be spiteful, lad, because things don't go as you wish. We all have to bear crosses in our time. But, as you say, there's some one else in the field. Garcia is an old lover, and I am under obligations to him. You must not in any way cross his path, Hal, for he is rich, and possesses a good deal of power over the Indians about here. I should say, Hal, that in this lawless country that man's life would not be safe who stood between him and his wishes. Don't offend him, Hal—don't offend him, Hal. He's a good fellow, but, like all those half-bloods, very susceptible."

"I'll promise you anything you like," I said gloomily, "but don't send me away. Let me stay and do something so as not to be an encumbrance to you, but don't send me away."

"No one wants to send you away, Hal," said my uncle kindly. "Look about you and see the country; shoot and fish a little, too. I need not say, beware of the caymen—the river swarms with them. See all you can of the place, and then you'll have to try somewhere else."

Texas or one of the States—those are the places for a young fellow like you.”

I sighed to myself, for it seemed to me now that there was no place on earth bearable but the one where Lilla dwelt; and then, clapping me on the shoulder, my uncle rose and went out.

I followed him at the end of a few minutes; and, so as to be alone, I wandered away from the house and heedlessly took one of the paths that led down to the river bank.





CHAPTER XV.

UNDER FASCINATION.

IT was very hot, but I did not notice it as I walked slowly and thoughtfully on. The sun was kept from beating down upon me by the dense foliage, but there was a steamy heat arising that at another time I should have felt oppressive. The country was so completely in a state of nature all around that half a mile from the hacienda one almost seemed to be traversing places where the foot of man had never trod. But nothing seemed then to take my attention, for I was forcing myself to remember that I was to think no more about Lilla; and at last I had worked myself round to believe that I should respect the promise given to my uncle, while I devoted myself to a project that had fixed itself in my mind—a project full of romance and imagination, one that might make me wealthy—in a position wherein I could laugh at Garcia's pretensions and boldly ask my uncle's consent, for I was hopeful of obtaining Lilla's. I was poor now, but need not remain so. Suppose by one grand stroke I could possess myself of the riches of a prince—how then?

The thought of it all was so exciting that I strode on, rapt in the golden vision, till reason pointed out two

obstacles: I might not succeed; and even if I did succeed, I might be too late and find that Garcia had won the prize we both had coveted.

"I'll try, though," I muttered.

And then I laughed bitterly as I thought of my uncle's warning. I was not afraid of Garcia, for he was at heart, I knew, a coward; but until I was in a position to come forward I felt sadly that my duty was to avoid Lilla—to leave all to the future; for, with the chances of failure so strongly opposed to me, it would not have been fair to have asked her to wait for what might never come to pass; and then, with the recollection of my beggarly position taunting me, I told myself bitterly that I might as well go back home and turn soap-boiler, and not stay out there indulging in golden dreams.

It was a scene almost of enchantment where I stood musing, but the beauties around had no charms for me. I was too much engrossed with the thoughts of old readings respecting the region in which I then was. I was recalling its history and the assertions of old writers respecting its wealth in gems and the precious metals. I did not see that now and then a timid deer had gazed at me for a moment and then bounded away through the brake; neither that again and again a deadly cascabel had glided, worm-like, almost from beneath my feet, uttering a low, ominous hiss as it wriggled away through the tall grass. Gorgeously-painted butterflies, grand in size, fluttered before me, to settle here and there upon some blossom bright as themselves, and then flit away again through the shadowy, golden-rayed forest arcades. Gem-like humming-birds darted here and there, while hardly less bright parroquets of many a hue shrieked,

whistled, and climbed in restless fashion around. Once there was a heavy, scuffling noise, and a small alligator dashed away towards a creek; but I could see nothing but gold—gold that should make me rich and win for me Lilla's love—a love that I dared to hope was mine already, even though I was but a beggarly adventurer.

Gold — always gold — everything was gilded; and through the golden haze that seemed to glow around me I saw a golden future of brightness, and happiness, and love. I grew more and more excited with the thoughts that pressed upon me, and at last, with a sensation of triumph, I exclaimed aloud:

“History shall be my divining-rod and the earth shall yield up her treasures! I shall not be the first adventurer to the golden mines who has brought home treasures; only that, if I win, I shall also gain a treasure greater far than those of old, for Lilla will also be my prize.”

This was the kind of mental stilt-talking I indulged in that day, seeing only the golden side. No doubt it seems very romantic and silly to the reader; but I have known young men, taken badly with that distemper called first love, just as romantic and excitable. In fact, many of us as we grow older recall our sensations, acts, and deeds, felt and performed during that strange delirium, with something like a smile upon our lips, though at the time every reader will agree with me I was somewhat of a goose.

I was romantic enough, and could only see the golden side; but there was a future before me such as I could not dream of—a reverse, terrible, thrilling, and enough, could I have penetrated the unknown, to have made me turn shuddering away, daring not, for the sake of others,

to prosecute searches whose results would have been too terrible to contemplate.

Rousing myself from my reverie, with my mind fully made up as to my future proceedings, I looked round, to find that I was but a very short distance from the hacienda, in a beautiful part of the forest that my uncle had as yet spared, but which he talked of, before long, clearing and adding to the plantation which it bounded.

I walked on for a dozen yards, parting the undergrowth as I went, walking cautiously now, for I had suddenly awakened to the fact that there might be danger in every bush or tuft of luxuriant, reedy grass; but there was, I knew, a beaten track a little farther on which led to the plantation, through which I meant to return.

And then, fifty yards through the dense vegetation, I came upon a creek—a mere ditch—leading to the river, half full of marshy growth, when, walking back a few yards for impetus, I ran from the bank, and was in the act of leaping the creek when every nerve seemed to thrill with a horrible sense of chilling dread, as beneath my feet there was a rushing rustling noise, mingled with the splashing of mud and water, the reedy grass bent and waved in different directions, and, though invisible to me, it was evident that some hideous beast—reptile, or whether serpent or cayman I could not tell—was retreating towards the river, perhaps only to turn upon me the next moment.

The danger was not visible; but unseen perils are sometimes more dreadful than those we meet face to face, when the imagination does not magnify the horror.

At anyrate, with my heart beating heavily I alighted

amongst the grass on the other side, dashed on, and a few minutes after was in the track, down which I turned, but only to stop spell-bound the next minute, as I reached a flowery opening across which lay the decaying huge trunk of a large fallen tree.

The place was a dense thicket all around of bright-hued blossoms, with their attendant train of bird and gorgeous insect. Huge trees threw their sheltering arms across, to break up the sun's rays into golden showers, which flecked and danced upon every verdant spot; but the great beauty of the scene which held me there was the sight of Lilla seated upon the fallen trunk, her little straw hat hanging from one muslin-covered arm by the knotted strings, and a little basket filled to overflowing with bright-hued flowers fallen at her feet.

I could not move nor speak for a few minutes, and then I was hesitating as to what I should do: avoid every meeting such as this out of respect to my promise, or warn her that but a short distance back I had come upon some hidden danger.

"She will laugh at me," I thought. "She is so used to hear of the forest inhabitants; and besides, after all, I did not see anything; it may only have been some timid animal escaping. I will go back another way."

In spite of myself a sigh escaped me as I gazed at the graceful form; and then, as I leaned forward it seemed to me that her attitude was unnatural and strained—that she was gazing intently upwards, as if at something a short distance above her head. I took a step forward—another and another, but she did not move; when, following the direction of her gaze, I found her eyes were fixed with a strange fascination at the great bough above her

—a huge gnarled and knotted bough, with here and there a tuft of foliage upon it, while its great thick bark was tinted and shady with rich brown and umber mosses, and—

“Good heavens!” I ejaculated, and then I was speechless. A sense of horror was constricting my heart. I was, as it were, fixed to the ground where I stood, hardly able to breathe, for as I had gazed at the rich marking on the great knotted limb a strange shuddering vibration had passed through it—it was in motion for many feet along its thickest part, and the umber markings glistened; for they were upon the scaly skin of a huge serpent, lying in many a fold and convolution upon the mighty bough.

What did it mean—what was going to happen?

I could not tell; but a deadly sickness came over me—a cold clammy perspiration bedewed my limbs. I could only see as through a mist, but plainly enough I could make out that fold was gliding over fold in a horrible lacing and enlacing of gigantic knots, till slowly the reptile’s head was thrust forward, with a gentle waving motion, rising from amidst a tuft of leaves; and then, as the gliding of the folds continued, the head descended in a slow, waving, swinging fashion, foot after foot nearer and nearer to Lilla, a forked tongue flashing and playing about the frightful jaws, and the hideous eyes fascinating the poor girl, so that I saw her gradually moving towards it.

Slowly, and ever rising and falling, the huge serpent’s head was lowered foot after foot of its vast length while fold after fold was gliding over the bough, and all this while I stood fixed to the earth as in the nightmare of a horrible dream.



CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT FOLLOWED THE ESCAPE.

I SAID at the end of the last chapter that it was like being in the nightmare of some horrible dream. I repeat that assertion; for as I recall my sensations I see again the horrible swaying head playing gently up and down, nearer and nearer, the sun glistening on the burnished coils, while others were hidden, to have their presence revealed by the quivering of twig and trembling of leaf, as they passed fold over fold, the monstrous reptile playing, as it were, with its victim, and approaching in a slow leisurely manner; but it was with the sense that in an instant it could fling itself upon its prey with the speed, force, and certainty of a well-cast lasso. It was the play of the cat tribe with prey; for I knew the mighty strength and elasticity of the coils—how they could dart, plunge, and then be rolled one upon the other round a helpless body in a hideous knot—how the knot would tighten till bones cracked and splintered, and the victim was reduced to a shapeless mass, ready to receive the horrible saliva of the monster previous to deglutition.

I could only stand with tottering knees, parted lips, staring eyes, and painfully drawn breath, longing to

engage in the unequal fight, or to, at least, make some noise to divert the horrible beast; but my mouth and throat were dry—I could not utter a sound. I was numbed in body, but the mental anguish was fearful, for all activity seemed to have fled to the seat of thought and in imagination I saw all that was to follow.

And all this time—a time whose duration seemed to me hours—Lilla did not move. At first, while being drawn under the loathsome reptile's fascination, she had gradually leaned towards it, till, fixed of eye, she had stopped perfectly motionless, as inch after inch her intended murderer approached.

I would gladly have closed my eyes, but I could not, any more than I could afford help. And now, unwilling witness that I was, I saw that the moment of extreme horror was approaching, for the serpent had drawn its folds on to a portion of the branch free from foliage; the coils were bent as if ready for a spring, the head was drawn back, the jaws distended; and at last I gave utterance to a hoarse cry and sprang forward, the spell that had held me was broken, and the next instant Lilla was in my arms, just as I heard a rustle; then there was a rush, and I was dashed violently to the ground.

But there were no coils round either of us, lashing us in a horrible embrace—no fangs were fixed in my shoulder; but lashing, darting, and whipping itself, as it were, in every direction, beating down tall grass and bushy growth, its horrible eyes flashing with pain and rage, the serpent was close at hand, while the next instant its coils were wrapt round a large jaguar, whose teeth and claws were fixed in the thickest part of the reptile, the creature holding on with all its might, at the same time that, cat-

like in its every act, it tore and ripped away at its enemy's body with the great talons of its hinder paws.

There was a fierce, savage, worrying growl, the snapping and rustling of tree and shrub, the lashing about of the serpent's body, as, now coiled round its assailant, now forced by agony to unwind, the two terrors of the South American forest continued their struggle. Now they were half-hidden by the undergrowth, whose disturbance only showed the changes in the savage warfare; now they struggled into sight, and it was very evident that the serpent was being worsted in the encounter, the jaguar having in the first strokes of its powerfully-armed hind paws inflicted terrible wounds, which incapacitated the reptile from using its potent weapon—the crushing power of its folds.

For a few minutes I could hardly believe in our escape from so horrible a peril; but, so far, we were undoubtedly safe, the tide of war now beginning, indeed, to roll away, it being evident that the jaguar was thoroughly worsting its enemy. At last I saw the huge tail of the serpent rise above the long grass, to vibrate and quiver in the air, twisting as if the horrible beast were in extreme agony; then it disappeared, and I prepared to try and bear Lilla away, for it was plain that the long-continued struggle was bringing the combatants back towards where we crouched.

But they only came near enough for me to catch, amidst the rapid evolutions, two or three glimpses of the jaguar's glistening, spotted coat, as he clung, still apparently unharmed, to his long lithe adversary, whose head was darting here, there, everywhere, in search of an avenue for escape. Then, again, came a series of writhing

contortions, as the serpent twined itself in its agony round the quadruped; and over and over, with the foliage crackling and snapping, they rolled, but ever now farther and farther away, till it was with a feeling of extreme thankfulness that I knelt there, holding the fainting girl in my arms, gazing eagerly in her pale face, and thinking of the fearful fate she had escaped.

Her eyes unclosed the next moment, to gaze in mine with a wild horrified aspect, till, awaking fully to the fact that she was saved, she flung her arms tightly round my neck, clinging to me, and then buried her face, sobbing vehemently, in my bosom.

Lilla had just raised her blushing face to mine, as she tried now, feebly, to free herself from my protecting arms; and then I started angrily up, for from close behind came the words:

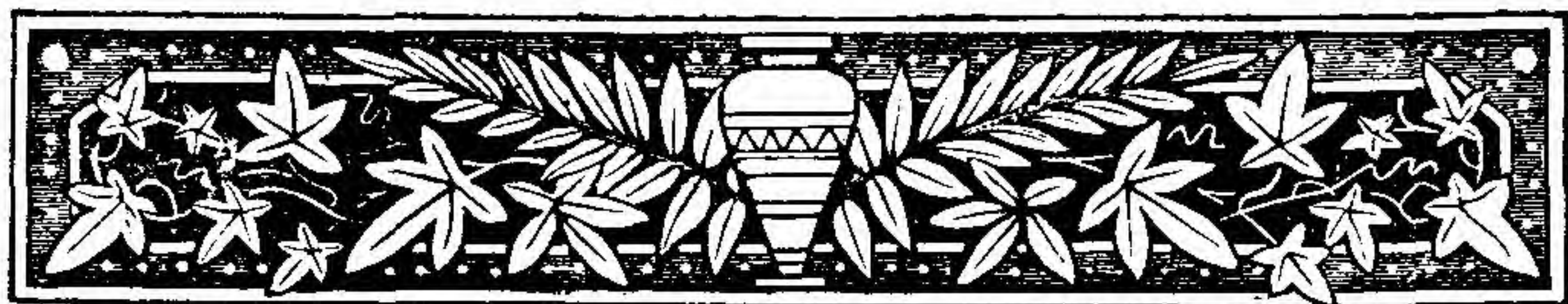
“Say, Mas’r Harry, is that there the custom of the country?”

“You impertinent dog, how dare you?” I exclaimed angrily. “What do you mean by spying there, and then asking such a question?”

“Only wanted to know, Mas’r Harry; because if it is the custom it’s all right; if it ain’t the custom it’s all wrong, and Master Landell and the Don, who are close behind, might think it queer.”

“We’ve just had a narrow escape from a most horrible death, Tom,” I exclaimed hastily. “Thank you for your warning.”

The next moment voices were audible. There was the rustling of the foliage, and as Lilla stood pale and leaning heavily upon my arm, my uncle and Garcia came hastily into sight.



CHAPTER XVII.

TROPHIES.

I HAVE seen some villainous-looking countenances in my time, but none more abhorrent of aspect than was that of Pablo Garcia, as, distorted with rage, he started on seeing Lilla resting half supported by me. The handsome regularity of his features seemed then to have the effect of making the distortion more striking. There was an angry frown, too, upon my uncle's face as he strode up; and, almost roughly taking Lilla from me, he exclaimed hoarsely:

"Harry, after what I said I did not expect this."

"It was quite by accident we met, Uncle. Lilla has had a terrible shock," I exclaimed hastily. "A hideous serpent—terrible conflict—"

I stopped short, for there was a sneering grin of disbelief on Garcia's countenance, which made me want to dash my fist in his face, as he said:

"Very terrible conflict—a very dragon attacking the maiden, and this new St. George of England coming to her rescue. I don't see any blood about."

"I should like to make some come from his nose," muttered Tom.

"What has happened?" said my uncle frowning; for he did not seem to like Garcia's allusion.

Lilla spoke in faint trembling tones:

"I was resting after gathering those flowers, when a rustling overhead took my attention, and—ah!—"

She shuddered, turned pale, and covered her face with her hands, quite unable to proceed; when my uncle turned to me, and I explained what I had seen, in proof of which I turned to the beaten-down foliage, upon which lay thickly, in spite of Garcia's words, fast-drying spots and gouts of blood, which we traced right down to the river's bank, in a dense bed of reeds, where they ceased, and it was not thought advisable to search farther.

"Let us get back, my child," said my uncle tenderly to Lilla. "You must come alone into the woods no more."

There was a troubled and meaning tone in my uncle's words, and more than once I caught his eye directed at me. But directly after he moved off towards the hacienda, closely followed by Garcia, while I hung back undecided how to act; for I was suffering from a troubled conscience, as I thought of the promise I had so lately given.

My reverie was interrupted by Tom, who had been standing unnoticed.

"Did you see Muster Garshar, Mas'r Harry," said Tom; "how he showed you the whole of his teeth, just like a mad dog going to bite?"

"No, Tom; I did not take particular notice of him," I said.

"Well, I did, Mas'r Harry," said Tom; "and if you

take my advice you'll look out; for they're a rum lot here, as you know. They don't hit with the fist, only when that there fist has got an ugly-looking knife in it, sharp as a razor; and when they hit a poor fellow with it, and he dies afterwards, they don't call it murder—they call it fighting—a set of uncultivated, ignorant savages! I only wish I had the teaching of them! But look here, Mas'r Harry, you'll take care, won't you?"

"Why, Tom?" I said dreamily.

"Why, Mas'r Harry? Why? because Muster Garshar don't like you—not a bit. That's all."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Ah! you may hyste your shoulders till you skretches your ears with them, Mas'r Harry; but that don't make no better of it. I promised your mother as I'd take care of you and stick to you; but how am I to do that if you get yourself spoiled somehow or other? But, say, Mas'r Harry, was it such a werry big un?"

"Was what a very big one?" I said wonderingly.

"Why, the sarpint—it might have been a sea-sarpint, for nobody seemed to believe in it."

"Yes," I said moodily, "an enormous beast."

"And he got it pretty hot from the tiger thing?"

"You saw the blood about, and now hold your tongue."

"But I ain't done yet, Mas'r Harry," said Tom eagerly. "That there Don wouldn't believe in it, and we knowed that it went into that brake. What do you say to going up to the house, getting the guns, and then shooting the beast and skinning him; so as to show them that English lads don't go bouncing and swelling about without they've got something to bounce and swell about?"

There was something in Tom's project that interested me, and I turned to him with eagerness. Adventure—something to prove that I had been no boaster, something to divert the current of my thoughts; it was the very thing, but I said gloomily the next minute:

"We should be too late, Tom; the beast must have taken to the river."

"All wounded beasts make to the water, Mas'r Harry," said Tom; "but we don't know that we should be too late. What I say is—Let's try."

"Come along then," I cried.

We walked up to the hacienda, encountering Garcia on the portal, ready to bestow upon us both a sneering grin as we again issued forth, each carrying a double gun loaded with buck-shot.

I don't think we, either of us, stopped to consider whether it was prudent to run the risk before us, with a very problematic chance of success; but hurrying back regardless of the sun, we soon stood once more by the fallen tree, and began to follow the beaten track left by the contending enemies till we reached the great brake by the river side, when for the first time we turned and looked at each other.

"Oh! it's all right, Mas'r Harry," said Tom; "and if he's in here we'll soon rouse him out." For it was evident that he had interpreted the doubt that had found a home in my mind.

"You think it will be here still?" I said.

"Sartain, Mas'r Harry; and—hist! don't speak above a whisper. He's in there, sure enough; for look yonder at those monkeys, they ain't chattering and swinging about there for nothing."

In effect a family of monkeys were aloft howling and making a deafening din, and I could not help thinking with Tom that it meant the presence of enemies.

"Look out!" I shouted the next minute to Tom; for a huge crocodile that we had passed unseen, sleeping amongst the dank herbage, had apparently awakened to the belief that we were trying to cut off its retreat and charging down straight at Tom in order to reach the river, it was only by a grand display of activity that might have been learned of the monkeys above us that he avoided the onslaught, and the next minute the hideous reptile had disappeared from sight; but we could hear its rustling onward progress, followed by a heavy splash, one or two ominous growls, and the increased activity of the monkeys, showing that our ideas with respect to these latter were not without basis.

"I tell you what, Mas'r Harry," said Tom, as he stood mopping the perspiration from his face, "them ugly beasts have got a spite against me, I know they have; and if I'm lost, mind this, I'm swallowed down by one of them crocks, I know I am, so mind that; and if you do go home without me tell Sally Smith that I was swallowed by a crockeydile, and all for love of she. Now, Mas'r Harry, I'm ready if you are? Let's both keep together, tread softly, and take good steady aim before we fire; for this ain't like putting a handful of oats in the snow in our yard and then shooting at cock-sparrers. If we hit what we've come after, mind 'twill be something to put in the bag!"

I was now as excited as Tom, and together we stepped slowly on through the dense brake, parting the heavy growth with the barrels of our guns as we trod lightly

over the swampy ground, which sent up a hot, stifling, steamy exhalation.

Yard after yard we pressed on, watchful ever; but though the track was plain enough, the elastic water grasses had sprung back so as to thoroughly impede our view, and we knew that at any moment we might be ready to plant our feet upon the wounded monster that we sought.

Twice over little alligators went scuttling from beneath our feet, at the last time drawing forth an ejaculation from Tom, and then we stopped short with our guns at our shoulders; for Tom's utterance was followed by a warning shriek from the monkeys, and then, as that ceased, came a low, fierce, snarling growl from apparently just in front.

"What shall we do?" I thought.

For a moment I felt disposed to try and get round some other way, but the slightest movement now was sufficient to bring forth a growl from our invisible enemy; and it was very plain that we had tracked the jaguar to his lair while the boa had escaped.

To have retreated would have been to bring it down upon us; so after a glance at Tom's resolute face I made a sign and we took a step in advance.

Only one; we had time for no more, for with a savage yell the jaguar bounded right at Tom from the opening; we just obtained a glimpse of it, and it was like firing at a streak of something brown passing rapidly through the air, but fire I did, both barrels almost simultaneously; and the next moment Tom was knocked down and the jaguar had disappeared amongst the reeds we had but just passed.

"Are you hurt, Tom?" I cried anxiously, as I stooped to secure his undischarged gun.

"Hurt!" he exclaimed angrily; "of course I am! Just as if you could have one of them great cats fly at you and knock you over without being hurt! But I ain't killed, Mas'r Harry," he said, rising and shaking himself. "'Them as is born to be hanged won't never be drowned,' and them as is born to be swallowed by crocks won't never be torn to pieces by wild cats. Look out, Mas'r Harry! Give it him again!"

At that moment, snarling and lashing its tail from side to side as it showed us its white teeth, the jaguar now crept back, cat-like, on its belly, as if about to spring, when, with the best aim I could, I gave it both barrels of Tom's gun, and with a convulsive bound the brute rolled over, dead.

"That's hotter than the country, Mas'r Harry!" said Tom. "But we killed him, anyhow; so load up. But, my! Mas'r Harry, what a beauty! And did you see when he showed his teeth?—he was the very image of the Don!"

I did not reply to Tom's remarks; but as I reloaded I could not help admiring the glossy, spotted coat of the great beast I had just slain—a brute whose activity and power must have been immense.

But we had not performed the task we had come to complete. This was something upon which I had not counted; and now, though quite satisfied in my own mind that the serpent had escaped, we left our conquered assailant and once more began cautiously to pursue the track with guns pointed in advance, but without the expectation of a fresh assault, when, as if determined to be first this time, Tom suddenly fired at an upraised, threatening head, and it fell upon the monstrous, helpless, writhing coils of the immense serpent.

For it was evident that here the reptile had become too exhausted to continue its retreat, and Tom had administered the *coup de grâce*.

It was almost an unnecessary shot, for the jaguar had terribly mangled the serpent, which was half-torn and bitten through in one place where it had been first seized; but even now I felt a strong desire to fire again, as I saw a hideous coil rise slowly and then fall motionless, while for the first time the monstrous proportions of the creature became apparent.

“Don’t stir, Mas’r Harry!” cried Tom triumphantly. “Keep watch over ’em, or some one else will swear as he did it. I’ll be back in less than half an hour.”

Then, before I could utter a word of remonstrance, Tom had dashed off, leaving me to my loathsome wardership. But not for long; he was soon back with four Indians, giving his orders lustily, and we stood and looked on while they skinned the trophies.

“Perhaps they’ll believe you now, Mas’r Harry,” said Tom. “We’ll take the skins up in triumph—that we will! But who’d ever have thought of my coming out here to shoot adders a hundred foot long?”

“Say five hundred, Tom,” I said laughing.

Well, ain’t he, Mas’r Harry?” cried Tom innocently.

For from the effect of his elation it is probable that his eyes magnified, though, upon the skin being stretched out and measured, it proved to be exactly twenty feet three inches in length, while the reptile’s girth was greater than the thigh of a stout, well-built man.

“But at last, with our trophies borne in front, we made our way back to the hacienda, the Indians shouting, and the whole of the workpeople turning out to welcome us.

But though my uncle expressed pleasure, and took the first opportunity of telling me that he had never for an instant doubted my word, it was plain enough that he was constrained in his manner; while as to Pablo Garcia, I believe that a blow would not have given him greater offence than did this proof which I forced upon him of the truth of my assertions.





CHAPTER XVIII.

GOLDEN DREAMS.

I SAW Lilla but once alone, and then the encounter was not of my seeking. She came up to me, though, with a sweet, sad expression in her face and a trusting look in her eyes that made my heart bound, as she laid her hands in mine and thanked me for what she called my gallantry; and I was so taken up by her words that I hardly noticed the scowl Garcia gave as he came in. In fact, just then my heart felt so large that in my joy I could have shaken hands with him so warmly that I should have made the bones of that fishy fin of his crack again.

But there was no handshaking: Garcia walking to the window and lighting a cigar, while Lilla hurried from the room, as was now her custom when Garcia came.

The first flush of joy passed and I was alone with the half-breed, to feel how impossible any friendly feeling was between us; and seeing that he was disposed to do nothing but stare at me in a half-sneering, half-scowling fashion, I strolled out, paying no heed to the burning sun as I made for the woods, where the trees screened me; and then on and on I went, mile after mile, through the hot steamy twilight, amidst giants of vegetation hoary

with moss. Beast or reptile, harmless or noxious, troubled me little now, for I was in pursuit of the golden idol of my thoughts, winning it from its concealment, and then, with everything around gilded by its lustre, living in a future that was all happiness and joy.

But I was not always dreaming. At times I searched eagerly in places that I thought likely to be the homes of buried Peruvian treasure; without avail, though, for I had no guide—nothing but tradition and the misty phantoms of bygone readings.

To the people at the hacienda my wanderings must have seemed absurd, for though I took my gun I never brought anything back. This day game was in abundance, but I did not heed it—only wandered on till I came to a rugged part of the forest far up the mountain-side, and seated myself on a lump of moss-grown rock in a gloomy, shady spot, tired and discouraged by the thought that I was pursuing a phantom.

What should I do, then? I asked myself. Go, as my uncle advised, to Texas? That meant separation; and yet I knew that I could not stay, and, in spite of all my golden hopes, the future looked very black to me. I kept putting it off, but it would come. I must look the difficulty in the face—the end must arrive; and I laughed bitterly as I thought of my prospect—even if such treasures as I had heard of did exist—of finding either of them in the vast wilds spread for hundreds of miles around.

My meditations were interrupted by the sharp crackle made by a dry twig trampled upon by a foot; there was a rustling noise close behind me, and as I turned I became aware of a face peering out at me from a dense bank of creepers, as a voice whispered:

"Is your gun loaded, Mas'r Harry?"

"You here, Tom!" I exclaimed.

"Course I am!" said Tom indignantly. "What else did I come out here for if it wasn't to take care of you? And a nice game you're carrying on—playing bo-peep with a fellow! Here you are one minute, and I says to myself, 'He won't go out this morning.' Next moment I look round, and you're gone! But this here sort of thing won't do, sir! If you're going on like this I shall give notice to leave, or else I shall never get back alive."

"Why not?" I said, laughing at his anxious face.

"'Cause of these here rambling ways of yours, sir."

"And if I take care, pray what danger is there in them, Tom?"

"Care—care!" echoed Tom. "Why, that's what you don't take, sir. I'm 'Care,' and you leave me at home. You don't say, 'Come and look after me, Tom,' but go on trusting to yourself, while all the time you're like some one in a dream."

"But what is there to be afraid of, Tom?"

"Sarpints, sir!"

"Pooh, Tom! We can shoot them, eh?—even if they are a hundred feet long! Well, what else?"

Tom grinned before he spoke.

"Jaggers, sir!"

"Seldom out except of a night, Tom."

"Fevers, sir!"

"Only in the low river-side parts, Tom. We're hundreds of feet above the river here."

"Snakes in the grass, sir!"

"Pooh, Tom! They always glide off when they hear one coming."

"Not my sort, Mas'r Harry," said Tom in an anxious whisper. "They're a dangerous sort, with a kind of captain, and he's a half-breed. If you will have it, and won't listen to reason, you must. Mas'r Harry, there's snakes in the grass—Indian-looking chaps who watch your every step, sir. You haven't thought it; but I've always been on the look-out, and as they've watched you, I've watched them. But they got behind me to-day, Mas'r Harry, and saw me; and I don't know what to think—whether Muster Garcia has sent 'em, or whether they think you are looking for anything of theirs. You don't think it, Mas'r Harry, but at this very minute they're busy at work watching us."

I started slightly at one of his remarks, but passed it off lightly.

"Pooh, Tom!" I said. "Who's dreaming now?"

"Not me, Mas'r Harry. I was never so wide awake in my life. I tell you, sir, I've seen you poking and stirring up amongst the sticks and stones in all sorts of places, just as if you was looking for some old woman's buried crock of crooked sixpences; and as soon as you've been gone these Indian chaps have come and looked, and stroked all the leaves and moss straight again. You're after something, Mas'r Harry, and they're after something; but I can't quite see through any of you yet. Wants a good, stout, double-wicked six held the other side, and then I could read you both like a book."

"Nonsense, Tom — nonsense!" I cried; though I felt troubled, and a vague sense of uneasiness seemed to come over me.

"P'r'aps it is nonsense, Mas'r Harry—perhaps it ain't. But this here ain't Old England; so don't you get think-

ing as there's a policeman round every corner to come and help you, because there ain't, no more than there's a public-house round the corner to get half a pint when a fellow's tongue's dried up to his roof. So now let's understand one another, Mas'r Harry. You've got to keep close up to the house."

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed. "What good would that do? Look here, Tom, my good fellow: I know you are faithful and true-hearted, but you have been following me about till you have found a mare's nest and seen an enemy in every Indian. You must learn to keep your place, Tom, and not to interfere."

Tom did not answer—he only looked sulky. Then, spitting in his hands, he rubbed them together, crawled out of the bush, stood up, let his gun fall into the hollow of his arm, and then thrusting his hands into his pockets, stood looking at me, as if prepared for the worst.

"Going any farther, Mas'r Harry?" he said as I rose.

"Yes," I said, "I'm going up this gorge."

Then with Tom closely following, I climbed on till we were in a vast rift, whose sides were one mass of beautiful verdure spangled with bright blossoms. High overhead, towering up and up, were the mountains, whose snow-capped summits glistened and flashed in the sun, while the ridges and ravines were either glittering and gorgeous or shadowy and of a deep, rich purple, fading into the blackness of night.

I stopped gazing around at the platform above platform of rock rising above me, and thought of what a magnificent site one of the flat table-lands would make for a town, little thinking that once a rich city had flourished there. Even Tom seemed attracted by the beauty of the

scene, for he stood gazing about till, seeing my intent, he came close behind me again, and together, with the traveller's love of treading the fresh and untried soil, we pressed on, climbing over loose fragments of rock, peering into the stream that bubbled musically down the bottom of the gorge, wending our way through the high growth of long tangled grass, till the gorge seemed to plunge into darkness, a huge eminence blocking the way, in whose face appeared a low, broad archway, forming the entrance to a tunnel, leading who could tell where?

Any attempt to follow another track was vain, as I soon perceived; for, as I saw, the gorge seemed to be continued beneath the archway, while right and left the rock was precipitous beyond the possibility of climbing even to the shelves, where ancient trees had securely rooted themselves in the sparse soil, to hang over and lend their gloom to the sombre scene.

But in spite of its mystery there was a something attractive in the vast cavern, from which it now became evident the little river sprang; for it ran trickling out beneath the rocks we clambered over, till we stood gazing in towards the shadowy depth, listening to strange echoes of a murmuring rising and falling sound that dominated all the faint whispers that escaped, as it were, from time to time to the light of day.

"What do you think of this, Tom?" I said, after vainly trying to see the cavern's extent.

"Think, Mas'r Harry? Why, it looks to me like the front door to Bogyland. But do let's get back, sir; for I was never so hungry before in my life. I say stop, Mas'r Harry—what are you a-going to do?"

"Do! Why, go in and explore the place, to be sure,

Tom," I cried, beginning to climb the rocky barrier that barred the way into the cavern.

"No, I say, pray don't, Mas'r Harry!" cried Tom dolefully. "I ain't afraid in the light, when you can see what you are doing, but I can't stand the dark, nohow. Don't go, Mas'r Harry. Think of what your poor mother would say."

"Hold your tongue, will you, you great calf!" I exclaimed angrily.

For an intense desire seemed to come over me to explore this dim, shadowy region. For what might we not find there treasured? It might be the ante-chamber to some rich, forgotten mine—one of the natural storehouses from which the old Peruvians had been used to extract their vast treasures. There were riches inexhaustible in the bowels of the earth, I knew, and if this were one of the gates by which they could be reached, held back from causes induced by cowardice I would not be—I had too great a prize to win.

But before I had crossed this natural barrier to the entrance, reason told me that I must have light, and provision, and strength for the undertaking; and at that time I had neither. There was nothing for it then but to listen to the voice of reason, as personified by Tom; and with a sigh I climbed back just as he was going to join me.

I saw plainly enough that it must be nightfall before we could reach home; and, getting free of the rocks, I was musing, and wondering whether, after all, I had hit upon a discovery, when Tom whispered to me, with averted head, to look to the right under the trees.

I did so, and became aware of a shadowy figure slink-

ing off amongst the bushes, but I took little heed of it then, trudging on as fast as the nature of the ground would allow; and at last, thoroughly worn out in body, but with my imagination heated, I reached the hacienda.

That evening, when I was alone with my uncle, I mentioned my discovery, and asked him if ever the cavern had been explored.

"Never that I am aware of, Harry," he said quietly; "and I don't think it would profit much the explorer. I have heard of the cave; it is a sort of sanctified place amongst the Indians, who people it with ghosts and goblins, such as they know how to invent. Let me see, what do they call the place in their barbarous tongue? Ah! I remember now—Tehutlan. I had forgotten its very existence. One of the old Peruvian gods used to live there in olden times, I believe, as a sort of dragon to watch over the hidden treasures of the earth. You had better search there and bring some of them out, or catch the dragon himself; he would make your fortune as an exhibitor in New York."

"And you think, Uncle, it has never been explored?" I said, without replying to his last remark.

"My dear boy, for goodness' sake give up dreaming and take to reality," he said pettishly. "Explored? Yes. I remember how they say the Spaniards explored it, and butchered a lot of the poor Peruvians there like so many sheep, but they found nothing. Don't think about treasure-seeking, Hal—it's a mistake; fortunes have to be made by toil and scheming, not by haphazard proceedings; but all the same I must say," he added musingly, "they do tell of the golden ornaments and vessels of the sun-worship hidden by the poor conquered people ages

ago to preserve them from their greedy conquerors. Their places are known even now, they say, having been handed down from father to son."

"But did you ever search?" I said eagerly.

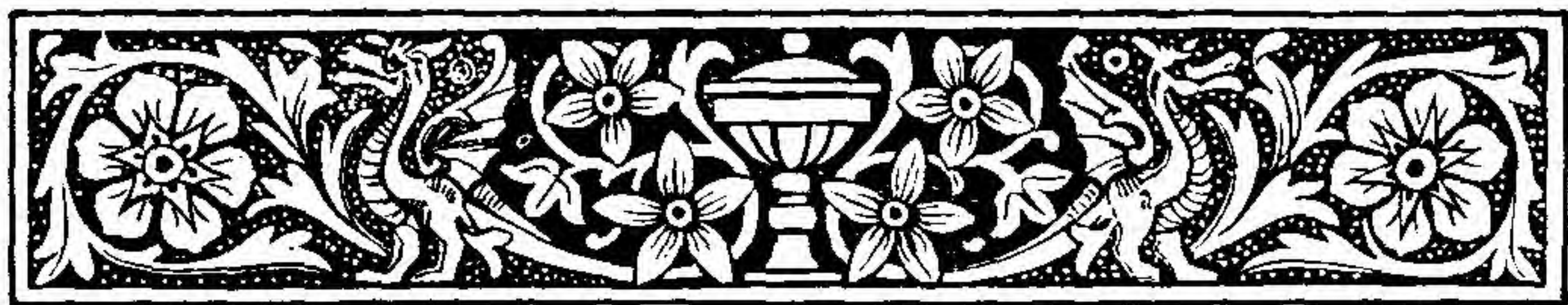
"Who? I? Pooh! Nonsense, Hal! My idea always was that gold was to be grown, not searched for; but after all, I might just as well have gone upon a harum-scarum gold-hunt as have sunk my few poor hundreds here."

The conversation was directly changed, for Garcia came in to take his evening cigar with the family, looking the while dark and scowling; but it had little effect upon me, for my thoughts were running upon the dim, mysterious cavern, with its echoes and shadows; and the more I thought, the more it seemed possible that a natural or an artificial discovery might there be made. By artificial, I meant the finding of a buried treasure. With the old profusion of gold in the land there must have been some rich mines. Why might not this be one of them?

"Anyhow, I have nothing to lose," I said to myself; and at last I retired to rest, excited with the thoughts of Lilla and the riches I might find—the consequence being that I lay awake half the night, forming all sorts of impossible schemes; but above all determining that, come what might, I would explore the great cavern of Tehutlan—*if*—

If what?

If I could find it again.



CHAPTER XIX.

BEGINNING TO "BURN."

THE sun was rising and sending his golden arrows darting through the thick mist which hung over the plantation, as I went out into the court-yard, to find all still and peaceful, for work had not yet commenced.

I had taken the precaution of laying in a good supply of provisions, which I carried in a wallet in company with flint and steel, matches, and several candles; for, instead of the morning light making my project seem absurd, I had grown warmer upon the subject, and come to the determination that if buried treasures had lain in the earth all these ages I might as well become the owner of one as for it to lie there another century, waiting some less scrupulous searcher.

The night had not been passed without quiet thought, and I had come to the conclusion that if so much gold had been used for the embellishment of the various temples, and that gold had been hastily torn down and hidden, it would most probably be in the vicinity of a ruined temple.

But at this present time I was red-hot for exploring the cavern, which did not fit with my common-sense

argument, without it should prove that there had once existed a temple somewhere on one of the platforms at the side of the gorge, when, if that should be the case, I felt sure that I had hit upon the right place.

What, then, was my first proceeding?

Evidently to search the sides of the ravine for traces of some ancient building.

Tom's words on the previous day had not been without effect. It was quite possible that I was watched, either by some spy of Garcia's, or, it might be, by some suspicious Indians who had seen me searching about, perhaps, for aught I could tell, close by one of the buried treasures, of whose existence they were aware.

What a thought that was!—it sent a thrill through me, and roused me to fresh energy and determination.

Under the circumstances, and granting that I had been watched—the figure I had seen corroborating Tom's words—it was evidently my policy to get away unseen; and to achieve this I had risen thus early, swung on my wallet, and, armed with my gun, a hunting-knife, and a long iron rod, I walked softly round the house, but only to have my nostrils saluted by the fumes of tobacco, and the next instant I was face to face with Tom Bulk, leaning against a post and smoking.

“Startin' so soon, Mas'r Harry!” he said quietly. “I thought you'd be in good time this morning.”

Then, paying not the slightest heed to my discontented looks, he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, shook himself together, and prepared to follow me.

“But I don't want you with me, Tom,” I said.

“Dessay not, Mas'r Harry; but I'm a-coming all the same, and got my gun cleaned up ready.”

I knew it was useless to complain—for Tom had already given me one or two samples of how obstinate he could turn—so I made the best of it; and, knowing that he was as trustworthy as man could be, I trudged on with him close behind, hour after hour, till, after several wanderings wide of the wished-for spot, we hit upon a little clear, cold, babbling stream.

“I’ll bet tuppence that comes out of that big hole,” said Tom eagerly.

The same thought had occurred to me; and now, just as I had given up all hope of finding the gorge that day, here was the silver clue that should lead us straight to its entrance.

The stream led us, as we had expected, right to the mouth of the gorge—that is, to where the rocks, which had heretofore been only a gentle slope clothed with abundant vegetation, suddenly contracted, became precipitous, and broken up into patches of rich fertility and sterile grandeur.

But now these charms were displayed in vain; for the gorge being reached, I prepared to examine carefully its sides, and accordingly began to climb.

“Thought you meant the big hole, Mas’r Harry?” said Tom, gazing uneasily about, and evidently seeing an enemy in every lump of rock or trunk of tree.

“Up here, Tom, first,” I said.

He followed me sturdily, without a word, up, and up, and up, climbing over the precipitous sides, with tough root or fibrous vine lending us their aid, till, breathless, we stopped to gaze round or down into the rich ravine below.

Platform after platform I reached, and then peered

about amongst the dense growth in search of some trace of masonry; but though again and again the blocks of stone wore the appearance of having been piled together, I could find nothing definite—nothing but that ever-recurring dense foliage creeping over and hiding everything, till we had panted up another hundred feet, where a much larger table-land or platform extended before us.

My heart beat painfully now; for, judging from appearances, it seemed that if ever temple had looked down upon the beautiful little vale, this must have been the spot where it was piled. The cavern was sacred to a god; there must, then, have been some temple or place of sacrifice near at hand, it seemed, and I longed to begin investigating; but only to seat myself upon a mossy block, dreading the search lest it should prove unfruitful, and so dash my golden visionary thoughts. But at length I was about to commence, when a throb of joy sent the blood coursing through my veins, for Tom said, in his dry ill-tempered way:

“Been some building going on here some time or another, Mas’r Harry.”

I started to my feet then, to find that the block I had used for my seat had once been squared for building, and on peering about, there, in every direction, amongst creeper, moss, and vine, lay fragments of some mighty temple. Some of the blocks were crumbling away; some square and fresh as if lately cut; and many of a size that was gigantic, and excited wonder as to how they could have been moved.

I was right, then. Here had once been a grand temple; and if its treasures had been hidden by the ancient priests of the place, where so likely a concealment as the mysteri-

ous cave, whose gloomy entrance I could just distinguish far off below us? The building must once have been grand, for every step revealed new traces, with the vegetable world completing the ruin commenced by man: mosses eating away, roots forcing themselves amongst interstices, and moving with mighty force stupendous blocks from their ancient sites.

"Yes, this was the temple. I was right so far," I exclaimed to myself. "Now, then, for the treasure! This way, Tom!" I exclaimed, turning to descend, eager now, and excited.

But the descent was steep at times, even perilous, though I heeded it not; and in less than half an hour we should have reached the stream meandering through the rugged bottom of the ravine, had not Tom, who was always on the look-out for danger, suddenly dragged me down into the shelter of a mossy boulder, and, in reply to my inquiring look, contented himself with pointing a little below us to the left, when, following the direction of his arm, it seemed to me that my secret starting that morning had been in vain. The golden treasure, if it existed, appeared about to be snatched from my grasp—my knowledge was about to be met by cunning, perhaps force. We were watched. Of that there was no doubt, and my heart sank with bitter disappointment; for there, where Tom pointed, plainly to be seen peering at us from a clump of verdure, was a pair of sharp bright eyes, their owner being carefully hidden from view.



CHAPTER XX.

IN SHADOWY LAND.

FOR quite a quarter of an hour we remained motionless—the watcher and the watched—Tom and I both well armed, and involuntarily our guns were pointed at the eyes; but the position was not one which justified firing. The ravine was as free to the owner of those eyes as to ourselves, and, after all, we had no proof that this was an enemy.

I was in doubt as to our next proceeding, and had just come to the conclusion that our most sensible plan would be to turn back without going near the cavern at all, and so try to throw the enemy off the scent, for I felt certain that whether I discovered a treasure or no, I was on the right track, when Tom whispered eagerly to me:

“Let’s show him that we know how to use our guns, Mas’r Harry. We won’t shoot him, but only give him a start. Look at that: there’s a poll-parrot—two of ’em—settled in the tree above him! It’s a long shot, but I think I could bring one down; so here goes!”

Tom levelled his piece and the next instant would have fired, when the parroquets began chattering, screaming, and fighting together, fluttering down towards the bushes which concealed our watcher. Then there was a rush, a

crashing of the undergrowth, and the owner of the eyes—a good-sized deer—bounded into sight for an instant, and then disappeared in a series of spring leaps, which soon took it out of sight in the dense growth.

“*I am* blessed!” exclaimed Tom, in accents of the most profound disgust. “If I’d known, wouldn’t I have fired, that’s all! Had some venison to take back, Mas’r Harry.”

“I’m very glad you did not, Tom,” I said.

For I felt how the report of a gun would have published our whereabouts, if there really were any lurkers near—a thing that I must say I now thought very probable, since the fact of there being a treasure in the cave, held sacred by the Indians, would, as a matter of course, render them very jealous of intruders.

“Where for now, Mas’r Harry?” said Tom.

“The cavern, Tom,” I said.

Finishing our descent we were not long in reaching the rocky barrier, evidently piled by Nature at the entrance of the vast frowning arch.

We stopped and looked around suspiciously; but the gorge was silent as the grave—not a leaf stirred; there was neither the hum of insect nor the note of bird. Heat—glowing heat—reflected from the rocks, already not to be touched without pain—and silence.

“Going in, Mas’r Harry?” said Tom.

“Of course,” I replied.

“Very good, Mas’r Harry; if you will, you will. But if we get lost, and then find ourselves right away down in no-man’s land, don’t you go and say it’s my fault.”

I was in no mood to reply, and clambering up the hot rocks, with little glancing lizards and beetles rushing away at every step, we soon stood gazing in at the

gloomy chamber, our eyes, unaccustomed to the gloom, penetrating but a few yards at a time, so that had there been a host of enemies within, they would have been unseen.

"Now, Tom!" I said excitedly, as together we climbed down into the shade, to feel the cool and pleasant change from broiling heat to what was, comparatively, a very low temperature. "Now, Tom, we are going to explore one of the wonders of the world!"

"Humph!" ejaculated Tom, who did not look at all pleased; "it's very big, and large, and cool. But say, Mas'r Harry," he exclaimed, brightening up, "it wouldn't make half a bad place for keeping tallers! Yah! what's that?"

"Only a bird," I said, as with a rush a couple of large birds had flown close by us, evidently alarmed at our visit to their home. "That's a good sign, Tom, and shows that you need not fancy there's an enemy behind every block of stone. If anyone was within those birds would not be there."

Tom grunted, and then, as if to show his unbelief, cocked both barrels of his gun, as, with eyes each moment growing more familiar with the gloom, we walked slowly forward into the darkness ahead—slowly, for the floor was rugged in places with fragments from the roof, and stalagmite. The roof was about fifty feet above our heads, and the span of the low corrugated arch, I should say, a hundred more than that. The stream was rippling noisily along, threading its way amongst the massive blocks of stone, murmuring musically over pebbles and sand. Now our way was wet and slimy, and then again rugged and dry, till, having penetrated some little dis-

tance with every precaution, we turned round to look back at the entrance, to see as pretty a picture as ever I gazed upon in my life. We could now see plainly the nature of the roof, hung with beautiful stalactites of many graceful forms, giving to the great arch the appearance of some grand specimen of Gothic tracery, through which we looked upon the ravine lit up by the outer sunshine, with its green, and gold, and blushing floral hues. It was a scene to be remembered for ever; but the gold in my thoughts seemed more glorious, and I turned from it without a sigh.

Another dozen yards and a curve in the cave hid the entrance from sight; we were in gloomy shades, where a light was necessary; and before going farther I paused to think.

If the treasure had been hidden there, where would it be?

Reason said directly, in the most distant and inaccessible recesses of the vast cavern.

And where was that? How far from the light of day?

That was the problem I had set myself to solve, and, in spite of a feeling of awe with which the place inspired me, I prepared for the solution.

It was no light task, and I have no shame in owning that I felt a strange reluctance to proceed along a rugged path wherein might at any time be yawning some fearful bottomless chasm, ready to swallow up the adventurer; but I would not show my dread, and if Tom felt any he was too obstinate to show his.

By means of string we tied each a candle to our pistol barrels, and then set forward, walking slowly, now with the floor of the cavern ascending, now with it sloping

down with a steep and rugged gradient, but always with the little river gurgling in darkness by our side, sometimes almost on a level with our feet, at others, where the path rose, running in a deep chasm whose black darkness made one shudder.

We must have penetrated, I should say, the greater part of a mile when the narrow rocky shelf upon which we were walking came to a sudden end, and holding down our candles, we tried to penetrate the depth before us, but in vain; we could only see a vast black abyss, over which we were standing upon a tongue of rock, while to right, to left, it was precisely the same—an awful falling away of all that was palpable—and we knew that a slip would have sent us to a horrible death.

“This is a fearsome, unked place, Mas’r Harry,” whispered Tom; but his words went floating around as if taken up by a chorus of mocking voices, and a strange shudder crept through me.

It was indeed awful, that vast obscurity, with death threatening us if we took another step; and I could not help thinking how easy it was for a people of a low order of intellect, blindly superstitious, to make this solemn hall the home of their poor idol. It was a place that took no little courage to explore, and often I felt my heart fail me ere I recalled the errand upon which I had come.

Was it likely that, sooner than it should fall into the hands of the Spaniards, gold almost invaluable had been cast into this awful gulf? It was probable; but, as far as I could see, recovery would have been impossible, unless, after all, it was not so profound as the darkness made it appear. But then, how to descend? To swing by a rope over the fearful chasm would have unnerved the stoutest

of heart, and I felt that I hardly could have dared such an adventure.

This, then, must be the extent of the cavern—or rather of our power to explore it in this direction—for, as I have before said, we stood right out upon a projecting piece of rock from which descent was absolutely impossible, and there was nothing for it but to turn back.

“Think it’s deep, Mas’r Harry?” whispered Tom loudly.

“Deep—deep—deep—deep—deep—deep!” came whispering back from all sides, making Tom shiver; but he recovered himself directly, and taking a piece of greasy newspaper from his pocket he loosely crumpled it together, knelt down close to the brink of the abyss, lit the paper, and then threw it from him to blaze out brightly, and fall down—down rapidly—as it burned lower, and lower, and lower, till at a vast depth it burned out, but without illuminating anything. We saw no reflection from rocky point or gleaming water, and our feeling of awe was increased.

“I’ll have another try, anyhow,” said Tom. “Ears will sometimes tell us what eyes won’t. Just lend a hand here, Mas’r Harry.”

For a moment or two I shrank from assisting him, on seeing his object, but directly after applied one hand to a rough block of stone that lay at our side, weighing, I should think, a hundred pounds.

We had about a couple of yards to move it, and then it rested upon the very brink, a shrinking sensation coming over me as I saw Tom stand, candle in hand, with one foot resting upon the rock ready to thrust it over.

"Now, then, Mas'r Harry," he said, "this'll find the bottom if anything will. We shall soon know now. Say when!"

I did not speak, for I was wondering whether that rough block was going down where that I coveted had been cast, and for a moment I was about to restrain Tom; but I thought that the fall of that stone would teach me whether the bottom was at an attainable depth or no, and I signed to Tom to thrust the fragment off.

"Over, Mas'r Harry?"

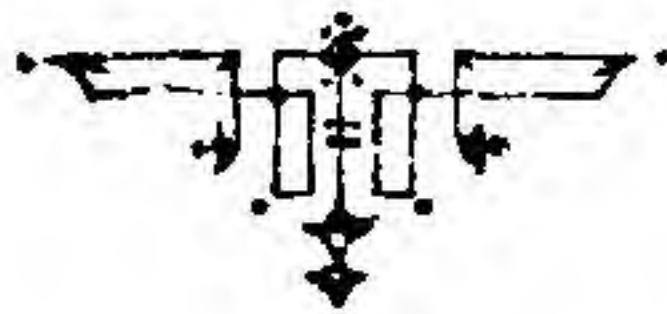
"Over!" I said in a whisper; and the next moment there was a grating noise and the stone had been thrust off to fall—fall—fall in silence, while with awe-stricken countenances we leaned over the gulf and listened, second after second, without avail, for no sound came up.

"It's gone bang through to the other side of the world, Mas'r Harry!" whispered Tom. "There ain't no end to this place, for if it had been ever so deep you must have heard it touch bottom some time. Ain't it awful!"

It was awful, and a hand seemed clutching my heart as I thought of falling, ever falling like that, or of some enemy dashing me over into the fearful gulf. There seemed to be indeed no bottom within ordinary range, and the idea of descending by rope in search there of treasure was absurd.

How long the stone had been falling I cannot say; but just as we had given up all thought of hearing of it more there came from the depths below a faint whisper of a splash, or of some pebble falling in water, but only for that whisper to be echoed and re-echoed from distant parts till it increased to a fearful roar that was some seconds in dying away.

It was impossible to help a shudder upon hearing those horrible reverberations, each one telling of the awful profundity of the place—one which, without extensive mining apparatus, I felt that any fathoming for search was out of the question.





CHAPTER XXI.

THE BLACK ARCH.

DREADFUL place indeed!

"They cannot have thrown any treasure down there," I mentally exclaimed the next moment.

"It must be somewhere recoverable."

"Say, Mas'r Harry," said Tom then, "hadn't we better get back?"

"Are you afraid, Tom?" I said.

"Well, no, Mas'r Harry, I ain't afraid; but I am nearer to being so than ever I was in my life. 'Taint fear, only one of my knees will keep going shikery-shakery, and my teeth have took it into their heads to make believe it's cold, and they're tapping together like the lid of a kettle in boiling time. But I ain't a bit afraid."

"It's an awful-looking place, Tom," I said, "and enough to make any one shudder."

"'Tis that, Mas'r Harry—'tis that indeed!" said Tom earnestly. "And if I believed in ghosts and goblins I should say as this was the shop where they was made. But—but, Mas'r Harry, what's that?"

I turned round hastily to look in the direction in which we had come, to see plainly a shadowy-looking form flitting, as it were, out of sight in the dim obscurity, and

a feeling of tremor came over me as I thought of our peril should we be attacked now, standing, as we were, with certain death behind and on either side; and determined that, if we were to encounter an enemy, it should be upon less dangerous ground, I called to Tom to follow me; and holding my dim light well in front, began to retrace my steps in the direction of the entrance, when there was a loud echoing cry from behind. I felt a violent blow in the back which dashed me to the ground, and in an instant our candles were extinguished and we were in darkness.

For a few moments I felt paralysed, expecting each instant that I should have to grapple with an enemy; but, save for the whisperings and the distant roar of water, all was silent till Tom spoke.

"Have you got the flint and steel, Mas'r Harry?"

"Yes," I whispered. "But what was the meaning of that blow and that cry?"

"It was me. I stumbled, Mas'r Harry," said Tom, "for there was a black thing like a devil's imp flew up out of the big hole and hit me in the face. But pray get a light, Mas'r Harry!"

That Tom's imp was some huge bat I did not for a moment doubt; but after seeing a shadowy figure in front I knew that it was possible that danger awaited us, so, hastily dragging flint and steel from my pocket, I was soon clinking away till a shower of sparks fell upon the tinder; the usual amount of blowing followed, and at last a match was fluttering its blue, cadaverous light, to blaze out soon and enable us to ignite our candles, now burned down very low, when, hastily pursuing our way, we came again without adventure into the great entrance,

the daylight being welcome indeed, when we sat down, about fifty yards from the mouth, to partake of some refreshments.

It is surprising what a tonic those provisions and a moderate taste of *aguardiente* formed. The daylight, too, lent its aid to restore the equilibrium of our nerves, and things wore an entirely different aspect.

"That must have been my shadow, Tom," I said at last, just as he was indulging in a pipe. "Your light threw it on to the dark curtain of gloom before us. And as for your imp, that was a huge bat."

"Well, do you know, Mas'r Harry," said Tom, "I do begin to think that I hollered afore I was hurt. But you know it really is an unked place in there, and wants a deal of getting used to, and I ain't a bit used to it yet. But don't you make no mistake, Mas'r Harry; if you want to go in again I'll go with you, and I can't say fairer than that."

"Well, Tom," I said thoughtfully, "I do want to go in again, for I'm not at all satisfied with my journey. I don't understand what became of this little river, for of course it must have turned off somewhere this side of the great hole."

"To be sure it did, Mas'r Harry; I saw where it went off under a bit of a tunnel just before we got to that horrible great place."

"Then the cavern must branch off there, Tom," I said. "That must be the part for us to explore."

"Very good, Mas'r Harry, when you like; but in case of an accident, and I don't come out any more, I think I'll tell the truth before I go in: I said I wasn't, Mas'r Harry, but I was awful scared and cold and creepy, but

I think I shall be better this time ; so when you're ready I am."

I expressed my readiness, and in spite of fatigue we stepped onward again till the darkness compelled us to stop and light candles, when, knowing now that there were no very great perils in the path, we made far more progress, and in a very short time arrived at the spot where Tom had seen that the bed of the stream took a fresh direction.

It was just as he had intimated: it suddenly turned off to the left, but beneath the shelving rock where we stood holding down our candles as far as we could reach ; and if we wished to explore farther there was nothing for it but to scramble down some forty feet to where the water ran murmuring amongst the blocks of stone, here all glazed over with the stalagmitic concretion that had dripped from the roof.

I led the way, and with very little difficulty stood at last by the stream, when Tom followed, and we slowly proceeded along its rocky bed till at the end of a few yards we came to the turn where it came gushing out of a dark arch, some six feet high and double that width, the water looking black and deep as it filled the arch from side to side, running swiftly—a river of ink in appearance.

"Tom," I said dreamily, "we must explore this dark tunnel."

"Very well, Mas'r Harry," he said in resigned tones.

And when a few minutes after I turned to look at him, he was leaning against a rock and removing his shoes and stockings.

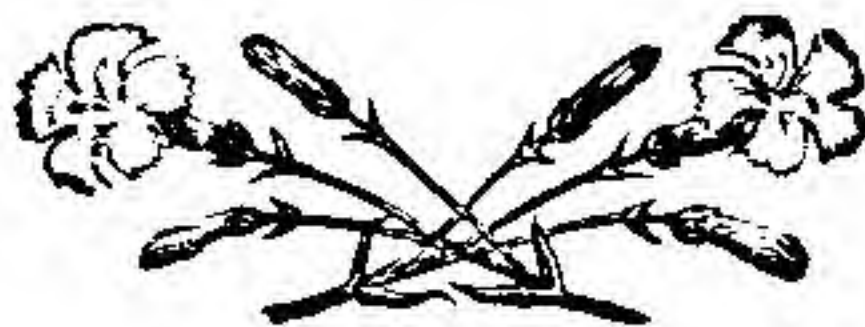
"What are you doing?" I said.

"Gettin' ready, Mas'r Harry; so as to have something dry to put on when we come back."

"But I'm not going to try without boat or raft, Tom," I said. "We must give it up for to-day."

Tom said no word but hurriedly replaced his extreme garments, and together we slowly made our way back to reach the light in time to see that the sun was very low down in the horizon, when completely wearied out we sat down to finish our provision, a very easy task, for I had only intended my store for one. But I must give Tom the credit of saying that he would not eat without much pressing, declaring that his pipe would satisfy him.

An hour after we were making our way back to the hacienda with, fortunately for us, a bright moon overhead, but it was nearly midnight before we reached the court-yard.





CHAPTER XXII.

THE RETURN TO SHADOW-LAND.

TOM was inexhaustible in his schemes, and at the end of three days he had contrived the very thing we required, in a light little raft composed of a few bamboo wands confining together a couple of inflated calf or small heifer skins, which floated lightly on the river like a pair of huge bladders.

"There, Mas'r Harry, what do you say to them, eh? Let all the wind out and double 'em up, cut fresh sticks over there by the cave, blow the bags out again, and there you are fitted up in style."

"Tom," I said joyfully, "you're a treasure!"

"Course I am, Mas'r Harry! And yet you wanted to leave me behind."

We were off the next morning before daybreak well armed, each carrying a pistol besides our gun, and travelled as rapidly as we could, being pretty well laden; our load being increased this time by better illuminating powers in the shape of rope thickly coated with pitch.

"You'll take the prog-bag, Mas'r Harry, as soon as we get there; and I've brought this bit of rope so as to sling the skin bags over my shoulders," said Tom.

"All right!" I said, and I nodded assent.

Having the advantage of a little more acquaintance with the road we arrived at the ravine in good time without seeing a soul, walked straight to the blocks in front of the great cave, climbed them, hastened in for some distance, and then sat down in the cool twilight to rest and refresh ourselves, the place being apparently just as we had left it some days before.

It was very laborious work that tramping through a trackless country, but an hour's rest and a hearty meal sufficed to make us once more eagerly set about our task; Tom now apparently as much excited as myself though without my deep interest. Tom's idea was that we might discover something wonderful, more singular perhaps than the vast chasm; but his fancies were exceedingly vague, while for my part I studiously preserved silence respecting my own intentions.

As soon as we reached the region of gloom we lit a candle and one torch, but so far, with the increased power of thoroughly illuminating the place, it only served to reveal the vastness of the awe-inspiring cave we were traversing.

Our progress was necessarily slow, but at last we stood over the arch from whence issued the stream, when, moved by a strange feeling of attraction, I left Tom busily preparing the raft while I walked forward with the torch to stand at last upon the rocky cape projecting over the awful gulf, and there stood holding the light above my head trying to penetrate the gloom.

But my endeavours were vain; above, beneath, around, the torch shed a halo of faint light, beyond that all was intense blackness, from out of which came the whisperings, murmurings, and roarings, evidently of water, but

which the imagination might easily have transposed into the mutterings of a vast and distant multitude.

With an involuntary shudder I turned away, thinking of the consequences of a sudden vertigo.

Tom was busy with knife and rope, and kneeling down I helped him, puffing into the skins till almost breathless; but at last our task was done, and together we carried the little raft down to the water-side, though not without several slips, launched it, and then placed upon it our lights stuck in lumps of clay brought for the purpose.

The raft was about six feet long by four feet wide; the skins supporting light sticks of bamboo well secured to them, and these in their turn bearing cross pieces laid in their places, so that the light vessel's deck, if I may call it so, was a sort of bamboo grating, upon which we could sit, though standing would have been a puzzling gymnastic exercise.

We were ready then at last; but now the same feeling seemed to pervade both as we stood there on the rock gazing before us at the black arch, through which, flowing easily, came the inky water. From where, from what strange regions?





CHAPTER XXIII

THE WATERFALL

I DON'T think many could have stood peering into that gloomy tunnel without feeling something like a tremor of dread. However, I mastered it at last, after asking myself the question, Was it wise to run such a risk? The answer came in the shape of gold—it might be the passage to traverse to arrive at inexhaustible treasure, and I turned to Tom.

“Are you ready?” I said.

“Yes, Mas'r Harry, I'm ready when I've lit my pipe,” he said.

And coolly filling it and igniting it from the torch, he crept boldly on to the little raft and took a bamboo, one of two cut on our way here, to pole us along.

After placing our guns in safety upon a ledge of rock, I crept on too, and the little raft swayed down heavily; but it was wonderfully buoyant, and with our lights in front we prepared for our subterranean passage.

“All right, Mas'r Harry?”

“Yes,” I replied.

And then we pushed off, poling ourselves along under the arch, the rugged wall being easily reached on either

side, the stream widening and not being very rapid after we had passed the first dozen yards.

The navigation proved so easy that we were able to glance about at the sides and roof, which often nearly touched us, compelling us to stoop, while at other times the tunnel opened out and we seemed to be making our way through a narrow lake. But it soon contracted again, and I should think our onward progress must have been through the damp, dark, winding way for quite a couple of miles; when, after seeing nothing but shining, glistening rock above us for hours, we seemed to have come to the end of our uneventful journey in a large irregularly shaped chamber whose roof of veined rock was about forty feet above us, its length being about two hundred feet, and its greatest breadth about sixty.

The stream had widened out into a little lake again, leaving, however, on one side a sandy shore some six or eight feet wide. The waters were troubled, as if in a state of ebullition, and for a while we sat wondering and listening to a loud moaning roar coming apparently from a distance. Then pushing on by the side, in a manner of speaking we coasted round the place till we reached the sandy shore and rested; for though the water flowed out through the arch by which we had entered there was no way of further exit from the great vault.

This, then, was the extent of the cavern river, and it was with disappointment that I went slowly round once more, poling the raft over the troubled waters, to find that there was no likelihood of a discovery here. The sandy shore was the only landing-place, and unless the treasure was buried there I could see no other spot where

a search could be made. As to the lake's profundity, of that we could tell nothing, only that at every attempt to touch bottom we withdrew our poles with a shiver.

Here, then, was the source of the river, which rose from springs somewhere far below—springs which caused the bubbling we saw, making our little raft to rock terribly in one part we passed over, so that we gladly sought the sandy shore and there remained listening to the lapping of the water and the faint distant roar.

"There must be another cavern beyond this, Tom," I said after a thoughtful pause.

"Ain't a doubt about it, Mas'r Harry," he replied. "It's my belief that if any one would do it he might go on for ever and ever, right through the inside of the earth to find it all full of places like this."

"Look!" I said eagerly, as I stood on the sandy slip of land and held up the light above my head, pointing the while to the end of the vault; "there's a rift up there, Tom, if we could climb to it, and that's where that roaring noise comes through."

"Mean to try it, Mas'r Harry?"

"Yes," I said, "if we can climb to it; otherwise we must come again with something we can fit together like a ladder."

"Oh! I can get up there, Mas'r Harry, I know," said Tom. "I've been up worse places than that in Cornwall after gulls' eggs."

Tom sprang ashore, and I gave a cry of horror, for the little raft was moving off; but with a leap Tom was back upon it and drew it ashore by a piece of line, which he tied to one of the poles after forcing it well down into the sand."

"That won't get away now, Mas'r Harry," he said.

And then stepping cautiously along over the sand, which gave way and seemed to shiver beneath our feet, we reached the end of the vault, and with very little difficulty climbed from cranny to cranny till we gained the opening—a mere slit between two masses of rock—through which we had to squeeze ourselves, and then wind up and up between block after block, that looked as though they had been riven asunder in some convulsion of nature.

Two or three times we were for going back, so arduous was the ascent; but determined to see our adventure to the end we pressed on and on, ever higher, till the noise became almost deafening, a cold dank wind too made our lights to flutter, and once they threatened to become extinct. But five minutes after the passage widened and the draught was not so fierce, while bright veins running through the rock at my side whispered of some rich metal or other for him who would venture thus far in its search.

"We're a-coming to it now, Mas'r Harry," said Tom shouting, for the noise was deafening.

The very next moment we were standing in a vast vault stretching out as far as our feeble light would show us, while about fifty feet to our left, in one black, gloomy, unbroken torrent, fell from some great height above, a cascade of water, black as night, till it reached the basin below us, which, even with our trembling lights, shone forth in a silvery, iridescent foam.

We could hardly hear the words we uttered from time to time, but we felt but little inclination to speak, so awe-inspiring was the scene before us; and it was not

until we had been gazing for some time that we ventured to climb down lower and lower, to find that the bottom of the cavern was a basin of restless water, from which it was evident some portion escaped through a natural conduit to the vault below, while probably the rest made its way to the vast gulf we had before seen.

Then up and down—now near the great foaming basin, then with arduous climbing close to the dome that formed the roof—I searched about, well aided by Tom, who seemed to think that I was looking for something precious, though he said nothing. At one time we approached so near the waterfall that we could distinguish, high up, the narrow archway through which it gushed. It seemed, too, that by a little management any one daring enough might have passed round the rocky amphitheatre in which we were, right beneath the waterfall to the other side, where rifts and faintly-discerned chasms whispered of further wondrous passages unexplored, and I felt sure—for the more I searched the more the feeling came home to me—that we were the first human beings who had ever entered this stronghold of nature.

With the exception of the bright veins I have mentioned there was no trace of gem or precious metal. The sides and roof sparkled and glistened again and again, but it was only with some stalactitic formation—beautiful to the eye, but worthless; and at last I felt that this was labour in vain—the treasure was no more here than in the vast chasm where we had hurled the stone; and, shouting to Tom my intentions, we stood and had another look, and then lit upon a mass of rock a large piece of oily oakum which we had brought for the purpose.

Our oakum burned brightly, but it was of little avail,

giving us not much more than a glimpse of the wonders of the grand chamber in which we stood ; and then we turned to go, but only to encounter an unexpected difficulty. The chamber was so vast and the rift by which we had entered the sloping side so high up amidst crags resembling one another that we had great difficulty in finding it, and I remember shuddering as I thought of the consequences of being lost there in the dark.





CHAPTER XXIV.

CAST ON A STRANGE SHORE.

BEING nervous or wanting in nerve is a state that would soon prove the ruin of the adventurous. We had to set ourselves determinedly to the task of finding our way back, and after a weary climb Tom pointed it out.

If anything, the descent was more laborious than the climbing up; but at last, tired out, we reached the vaulted chamber with its troubled lake and narrow sandy strip of shore—a welcome place, gloomy and horrible as it was, for it meant rest upon our raft, and the gliding out with the stream to the entrance arch, and then not so very long a journey to the blessed light of heaven.

“Ah!”

That cry burst from our lips simultaneously, as, climbing down to reach the sand, we held our lights low to see—what?

That there must be a sort of tide in the lake, small as it was; for the water was bubbling up more fiercely with a hissing noise, and there was no sand—the waters had covered it; there was no raft—the pole had been loosened by the water and the raft had gone, floated away, to be driven by the stream to the tunnel, and then swim lightly

away to leave us to a horrible death—a self-sought death; and as I thought of what I had done in my insensate greed for gold I could have groaned aloud.

But no, it was no insensate greed, I told myself—it was for Lilla's sake—and my eyes filled with tears as I thought that I should never see her more, and that Garcia——

That name sent a thrill of energy through my weary frame, and calling upon speechless Tom, I told him to light a piece more oakum; and he did so, to reveal plainly the raft floating about right at the end of the great vault, and apparently nearing the arch of exit.

What were we to do?

There was but one answer. Dash into that horrible black lake and swim to the raft, or else stay and die.

It was dreadful, to plunge into those mysteriously disturbed waters, containing far below who could tell what hideous monsters?—to swim, or try to swim, where the strange eddies and whirlpools might draw the struggling wretch down! To swim, too, in profound darkness; for I felt that if the attempt were made it would be made together.

The thoughts in my breast must have been the same as those in poor Tom's; for, looking at the faintly-discerned raft and then up at me, he said with a groan:

“Mas'r Harry, I daren't!”

“Tom,” I said, “I dare not!”

“But tell me to try it, Mas'r Harry,” he cried—“order me to swim off to it, and I'll try. I shall be sucked down like a cork in a sink-hole, but tell me to do it—order me and make me, and I'll try; but I daren't go without I was made.”

“Light another piece of oakum, Tom,” I said hoarsely.

"Perhaps the water on the sand is shallow and we might walk along to the other end, and then try to swim together: it would not be half so far. But stay—hold my hand while I step down and try."

We crept down to where the sand had been bare when we left it, though loose and yielding; and, sticking the short piece of candle in a crevice, Tom seized my hand firmly and I stepped down into the water, but only to cry to Tom to draw me forth, for the sand was quick now and watery, and more dangerous to him who ventured upon it than the lake itself.

It was not without a sharp struggle that I once more stood beside Tom upon the ledge of rock, when without a word he drew out the oakum and prepared to light it, while, half beside myself with horror, I tried to calculate how far was the distance, and whether, by well marking the spot where the raft floated, we could not contrive to hit it in swimming in the dark. That we should have to swim in the dark I knew; for neither of us, I felt, could then have swum with one hand, holding a light above the troubled waters with the other.

Just then Tom's oakum blazed up behind me, to light up the vault with its sparkling stalactitic roof, glistening sides, and strangely-agitated water. There floated the raft plainly enough just in front of the arch, and so near to our reach that in an instant Tom had thrown off cap, wallet, and jacket beside the candles stuck in the rock and the still burning oakum.

"No, Tom—no!" I cried, catching at him; "you must not risk it."

"Let go, Mas'r Harry—I must!" he shouted. "I swore I'd stick to you."

He struck me in the chest so that I staggered back, and then there was a loud splash and he was swimming away.

To start up and throw off my own jacket and wallet was the work of an instant, for, with his example, I could not stay back. We were companions, and I felt that it would be cowardly after he had taken the first plunge.

Another instant and I was after him, "plash!" with the noise of my plunge still echoing as I rose above the waters—echoing in a strange whisper along the arched roof. But oh! the painful, numbing sensation of intense cold that struck to my heart! It was fearful, and before I had taken a dozen strokes I felt that I should never reach the raft.

I was not called upon so to do, for the next minute, in answer to my cry came a groan from Tom, and I knew that he was swimming back, and the next moment he shrieked:

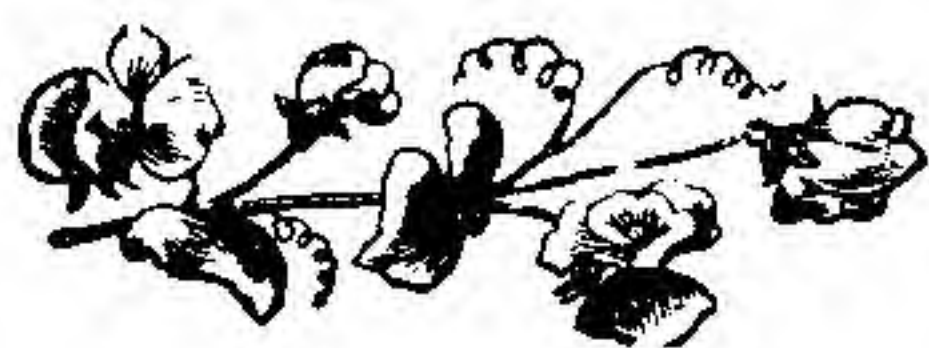
"Mas'r Harry, back! lend me a hand! Cramp—cramp!"

And then he gave a shriek of agony which roused me to a state of frenzy, as I could just see him beating the water with frantic effort close by my side.

The raft was forgotten then as with a vigorous stroke I reached him, placed one arm beneath his, and then struck out for the lights.

How I reached them I cannot recall: only a horrible struggle, the echoing of splashing water, the reaching of the cold, slimy rock with something seeming to draw me under, a fierce effort to get out, the dragging forth of poor Tom, who sank by my side with a groan; and then in a dreamy state I pulled the last piece of oakum from

Tom's wallet, held it to one of the candles for it to blaze up, sputtering loudly from the wet hand that held it. I sheltered my eyes after pressing out the water, looked again and again, separated the oakum so that it flared more and more, lighting up the low arch through which we had entered, when I groaned to myself: was this to be the end of my golden dreams—death in this hideous vault? for the stream set swiftly now through the arch, and the raft was gone!





CHAPTER XXV.

A NIGHT'S REST.

THE bright, flaring, spluttering blaze, glimmering and flashing upon the troubled waters and reflected from the roof; then, as it sank down, comparative darkness, for the two scraps of candle seemed to burn very dimly. Tom lay upon the rocks without speaking, while the agony that passed through my brain was intense. I felt that I had murdered the poor fellow, who was called upon to give up his young life through his fidelity to what any thoughtful man would call my wild follies.

We were to die, then, here, in this wild, mysterious cave, far beyond the reach of aid; for even if we had not by our caution thoroughly concealed our coming, who would dare to follow our route, unless by chance the raft were seen?

That certainly afforded a faint gleam of hope, and another came directly to fortify it. My uncle had talked about the great cave, and its exploration had been mentioned. It was possible, then, that upon our absence causing uneasiness a search might be made in this direction; for I knew my uncle too well to think that he would leave his sister's child unsought.

But if he did not arrive in time? or if some of Garcia's spies had seen us enter and were to mislead the searchers?

The thought was too horrible; and I shuddered as I thought of Lilla and her fate, till a maddening sensation of jealousy drove for a few minutes all fear and dread away.

My musings were arrested by Tom, who made me start by suddenly taking my dripping hand between his—damp and icy to the touch.

The next moment he was holding my hand to his breast, so that I could feel the laboured beatings of his true heart as he exclaimed hoarsely:

“Mas'r Harry, you saved my life then, and I'll never forget it.”

“Nonsense, Tom!” I said with gloomy cheerfulness. “It's all give and take out here. Why, you saved me from the crocodiles.”

“Cuss 'em! Don't talk about 'em here, Mas'r Harry,” said Tom in a whisper. “We don't know but what there's horrible ones living in these dreadful waters. That there cramp taking me in the leg like that made me feel as if one had got hold of me. I'm a horrible coward, Mas'r Harry, that I am.”

“Tom,” I said, “this place is enough to unnerve any one.”

Then we were silent, for the strange echoings of our voices had an unearthly, terrible effect upon our nerves; and more than once I started at the grotesque shadow of myself upon the wall. The roar of the great waterfall came humming through the rift above our heads, while below the waters hissed, and bubbled, and lapped against

the rocks in a curious, whispering, awe-inspiring fashion; and then moved by the same impulse we both took off and wrung all the moisture we could out of our things before standing shivering before the lights, one of which was already beginning to gutter down and threatened to become extinct.

Upon examining our wallets we found that we each had a couple of candles left, but our provision was very low; and the question now arose as to the next proceeding.

"Won't do to lie down and die, Mas'r Harry," said Tom. "I'm ever so much warmer now."

"No, Tom," I said, "we'll fight to the last; but what are we to do?"

"Well, Mas'r Harry, I'd first of all get up into the crack of a passage up there before the lights go out, for there's no knowing how high this water may rise; and if I ain't to see daylight no more, but to die here, I should like to die dry and warm."

"Don't talk about death, Tom," I said with a shudder. "Let's fight for life to the last, and, as you say, we'll climb up to the rift."

One candle burned out as we tried to move it, and deferring the lighting of another for reasons of economy, we climbed to the narrow crack-like passage and went along it about thirty yards before Tom, who was first, turned round in a part where the passage widened a few feet.

"Now look here, Mas'r Harry," he said. "We don't know that there ain't no other way out of the cave. I should say as there is if we could find it; 't all events we mustn't lie down and die till we've looked about and the

candles are burned away, and then felt about till we can't feel no longer. So see here, Mas'r Harry, we're wet, and cold, and tired out, and we can't do nothing better than sit down here and have a good sleep. Then we'll wake up, eat the bit of grub there is left, and go to work again fresh. What do you say?"

"Say? That I think you are right, Tom," I replied, trying to imitate his cheerfulness. "But about the light?"

"Light, Mas'r Harry? Why, we must put it out. We ain't little children to be afraid to go to sleep in the dark. Then you've got your tinder-box and matches all dry in the wallet, and we can light up and go at it again in the morning, or night, or whatever it is, Mas'r Harry, for there ain't no difference here. Who knows but what, while we are looking for the way out, we mayn't find what you want?"

"What I want, Tom?" I said suspiciously.

"To be sure, Mas'r Harry? What you want, whatever that may be—I don't say as it's gold mines, or dymons, or what not; only whatever it is we *may* find it, for I shouldn't be surprised at finding anything here."

I did not reply; but making the best of the sad lodging that was to be ours for the next few hours, and all wet and shivering as we were, creeping together for warmth, we lay down, and I stretched out my hand to extinguish the candle.

But my hand was arrested half-way, as I looked upon the glittering rock above my head and listened to the hissing, seething noise of the water below us in the long vault and the faint roar of the cataract far above us to the left. Now with a sense of dread indescribable I

thought of the water rising to where we were during our sleep, and whether it would not be better to light another candle. Anything was better than lying there in the horrible darkness.

The spare supply of light we possessed, though, would be wanted after our sleep, and reluctantly I pressed down the wick; thinking as I did so what would be the use of the gold if I found it now and there should be no means of escape!

“What time would you like your shaving-water, Mas’r Harry?” said Tom, whose teeth chattered as he spoke.

“This is no time for laughing, Tom,” I said gloomily.

“I don’t see as it’s any time for crying, Mas’r Harry,” he replied, “for I’m quite wet enough without that.”

Then he was silent, and we lay in that awful darkness, which in, spite of my efforts, I kept peopling with multitudinous horrors.

Then I seemed to lose consciousness; in spite of hard rock, cold, and damp, sleeping heavily, and dreaming now of Lilla, who seemed to be in some terrible peril from which I could not save her. I wanted to reach her, but something kept me away, while the danger she was in, as it floated before my distempered imagination, was somehow connected with Garcia, and Indians, and fire, or a mingling of all three. I felt ready to cry out as I struggled against the power that held me back; but at last I saw what it was that stayed me; it was the gold for which I had been seeking—piled-up, heavy masses of gold—holding me down, crushing me almost, while Lilla’s sweet imploring face was turned to me as if asking my help. I strained, I longed to release myself, but in vain; and at last one great ponderous mass began to move

towards me slowly, with a heavy, roaring noise, till it rested upon my chest, and with a start I woke to find one of Tom's arms thrown across my throat and him snoring loudly.

For a few minutes I lay aghast, unable to make out where I was; but by degrees recollection brought back all the horrors of our position, and with a sigh I managed to rid myself of Tom's arm.

I settled myself to try and sleep once more, so as to be ready for what would, I knew, prove an arduous, wearying task, tiring alike to body and spirit; when my blood seemed to be frozen in my veins, for there came a soft, fluttering noise, the air seemed to fan my cheeks as I lay, and then there echoed through the place three wild, appalling cries, followed by profound silence.

"Who's that a-calling? It won't do, Muster Garcia! You left her to drown, eh? What! Hillos! Say, Mas'r Harry, was I dreaming or did you call?"

"I did not call, Tom," I whispered; "but there is some one in here besides us. Hark!"

Again, as I spoke, and heard plainly above the distant roar, three more cries came sweeping along, and once more there was silence.

"All right, Mas'r Harry," said Tom; "better chance for us to get out. If some one else can come in that only shows that there's another way; and when it's time to get up, why, up we get, for I don't feel a bit disposed to try any more sleep here—it's too much like hard work!"

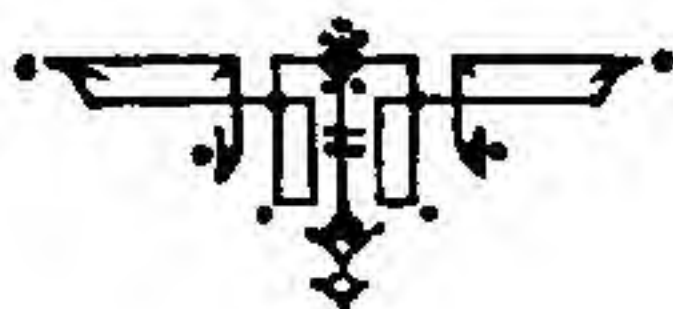
"I don't think the cries were human, Tom," I said.

"Never mind that, Mas'r Harry, they weren't ghosts' cries. I'll bet that. Now, if my old mother was here she'd stick out as it was a spirit as couldn't—Oh, Mas'r

Harry, though, what a horrid screech!" he whispered, as again a long-drawn, hollow, echoing cry ran through the passages.

I do not think I'm more timid than most lads would have been at a time like this; but my hands trembled as I sought for the flint, steel, and tinder-box, anxious to be out of the darkness that hemmed us in on all sides, and it was not until I had tried for some time that I was able to ignite the tinder.

At last, though, the brimstone match was held down to the spot glowing beneath my breath, the blue flame was succeeded by that of the wooden splint, and once more our spirits rose as the feeble light of a candle was reflected from the rocky walls.





CHAPTER XXVI.

THE AMPHITHEATRE.

WE were half numbed with the cold, but I found now that, in spite of our troubled dreams and its apparent brevity, our sleep must have continued for a long time, for our clothes were nearly dry.

“Now, then, Mas’r Harry,” said Tom, “never mind no shrieks and cries; let’s eat what there is in that bag and drink what there is in that bottle, and then go on our voyage of discovery. It will give us strength for the job, besides being ever so much easier to carry. If anything queer comes near us we’ve got our pistols, so let them look out.”

In spite of the feeling of tremor caused by the mysterious cries I was eager enough to move, and we began to climb up once more through the crack, after stepping back to the vault, holding up our candles, and making sure that by no possibility we had overlooked the raft.

As to its floating away I felt that it would not go very far on reaching the end of the tunnel, there were too many obstacles in the way in the shape of great boulders to block up the stream; so that hope of relief was but faint there even if a search was commenced.

There was no raft in sight; nothing but the strange, troubled water, ever bubbling and leaping up; and with a shudder, as we thought of the struggle we had had, we turned away, but not without seeing that the sand strip was now about half bare.

It was no time for being nervous. We knew that to live we must find a means of exit while our candles lasted, so started once more to thread our way along through the rift and right on to the huge cavern where the cascade of water came thundering down.

Here we halted for a time to gain breath, and then set to work to thoroughly explore the place; so we pushed on nearer and nearer, to find that, as we expected, we could pass right round behind the waterfall, over the slippery, wet stones, worn into seams, as if at one time the stream had rushed down them; but no trace of rift or passage could we find save one small crevice through which it seemed possible that a body might be squeezed.

"Never mind, Mas'r Harry, that can't be the way; let's try farther round this other side."

Tom led now and I followed, leaving the cascade behind us, and thoroughly examining the other side of the amphitheatre, but without avail; when we sat down, worn out, about opposite to the rift where we had entered, too disheartened to speak, till Tom said:

"We shall have to try and crawl through that hole, Mas'r Harry—there, under the waterfall."

"A dog could hardly do it, Tom," I said bitterly, and then I started. "Stop a moment," I cried. That was a regular crack or split in the rock that we came through, Tom; such a one as might have been made by an earthquake."

"Sure it was, Mas'r Harry; but you don't think as another one has come and shut it up, do you?"

"No, no, Tom," I cried, leaping up and forgetting my fatigue; "but why should not that crack be continued on this side—here, just opposite where we are? Come, climb higher with me, and let us have another try."

My thought was a bright one; for far up, just where the side of the amphitheatre began to curve into the dome which formed the roof, we found a crack answering to the one through which we entered on the other side; and squeezing ourselves through, we found that we were in another narrow passage—so narrow, though, that we proceeded with great difficulty.

"This must be the way out, Tom," I said.

"Or the way in, Mas'r Harry," said Tom; "one of them two. Anyhow, though, we shall soon see."

Not so soon, though, as Tom expected; for we crept on and climbed for quite a couple of hours, winding and doubling about, before the rift opened out, sloping, too, at the same time, so that walking became out of the question; and we climbed slowly down till we lost sight of roof and sides. Then on and on, slowly and carefully, where a false step would have sent us gliding we knew not where; and then we stopped, aghast, with a fearful chasm at our feet, to awake to the fact that we had climbed down to the extreme edge of an awful precipice, while, on holding up our lights, there before us was darkness, black and impenetrable, above, around, beneath.

The same thought occurred to both, and in a whisper we gave utterance to that thought together, though in different words.

"Tom, we've come round to another part of the great black gulf."

"Mas'r Harry, this is the same place where we pitched down the big stone. Let's try another."

More to prove the truth of our thought than anything else, I assented; and finding a good-sized lump, Tom hurled it outwards with all his might, and then we listened as we had listened before, to hear it at last strike water at a profound depth, with the same roar of echoes to make us shrink shuddering back.

"It is the same place, Tom," I said, speaking hoarsely, for this was another damp to our hopes.

There was apparently no chance even of reaching the rocky point where we had stood the day before, for that point stood out alone, and I could not see how it could be reached; but in a dull, despondent way, I thought that we would try to the last; and shrinking back a few yards from the edge of the precipice, we began to climb along the side, in the hope of finding some outlet in that direction; for could we but reach that point by any means we were safe.

Ten minutes' climbing in a state of extreme horror, with the loose fragments of rock slipping from beneath our hands and feet, to roll rattling over the edge of the vast chasm, and then we were brought to a standstill; for there, right in front, was a bare, smooth, perpendicular wall of rock, inexorable as fate itself.

We turned and began to climb back along the horrid slope, when, with a sensation of horror that I hardly dare to recall, I felt my legs slip, my hands, torn, wet, and bleeding as they were, to glide over the stone to which I clung; and, with a feeble cry for aid to Tom, I gave myself up for lost.

With a shriek like that which might have been expected to have emanated from some wild beast, Tom leaped to my side, caught at me, and then, clinging together, we continued our downward course for what seemed an interminable length of time, when there was a sudden stoppage. Tom's feet rested in a cleft of the rock, and he held me fast, as I lay gasping, with my legs hanging for some distance over the frightful chasm.

For full five minutes we did not either of us move, since it seemed that the slightest attempt to alter our position must result in a plunge into the darkness yawning to receive us.

One candle was extinguished, but the other lay guttering and flaring some twenty feet above us, wasting rapidly, and casting its feeble, weird light upon where we clung.

We neither of us spoke, but softly feeling about, I at length got my fingers in a chink of rock, which gave me courage to move my legs, so that at last they rested upon a rough point or knob. Then, by Tom's guiding, my other hand found a hole, and by an effort I climbed on to the slope, to lie panting and waiting for nerve.

Help me Tom could not from his position, and had I not stirred myself I must have fallen at last; but he had well paid the debt he owed me for my last night's efforts, as I told him when we had cautiously made our way back up the slope in a diagonal direction to where the rift opened, to sink down at last, breathless and thankful, in the narrow way; glad even to be beyond reach of the influence of the horrible gulf, which had for me an attraction that was appalling.

We were very quiet now, as we half sat, half lay upon

the rocky bottom of the crack, till our strength was somewhat renewed after our late efforts, when, dragging myself up, I wiped the clammy dew from my forehead, and Tom followed my example.

"Tom," I exclaimed, "inaction means death. Let's try that hole behind the fall."

"Right, Mas'r Harry," said Tom, essaying to be cheerful.

And without another word he rose, took his candle from the niche in which he had placed it, and together we made our way back into the amphitheatre. Then we climbed over the blocks to behind the fall, where, going down upon his knees, Tom held his candle in at arm's-length, and then essayed to creep in at the little opening.

I looked on anxiously as his head and shoulders disappeared, then his whole body; and I was preparing to follow him when he wriggled himself back, to face me with a sad shake of the head.

"No good, Mas'r Harry—a baby couldn't go through there."

I took his word, and led the way back till we were clear of the mist shed by the fall, and then I set to and tried if the great problem of our escape could not be solved; and at last when all hope was ready to expire in my bosom the solution came.

We were sitting, sad and dejected, worn by our long toil, when suddenly we were startled by a shriek similar to those which we had heard upon our awaking.

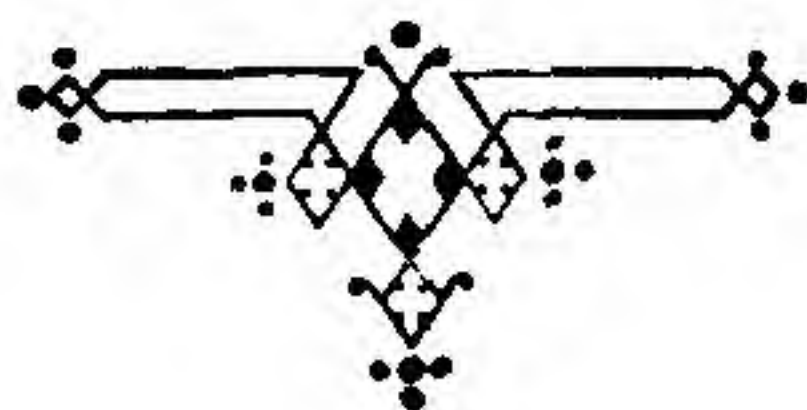
Tom pressed close to me, and I must confess to a strange sensation of awe, as now, one after another, these wild cries came ringing out of the darkness around. Now

near, now far off, and fading away as it were, till one was uttered close by my ear, and I saw a shadowy form sweep past the light shed by our one poor feeble candle; then another and another; when, angry with myself for my superstitious dread, I exclaimed aloud:

“Why, they’re birds!”

“Birds they are!” cried Tom gently. “But are they real birds, Mas’r Harry?”

“Real? yes, Tom!” I exclaimed excitedly. “And there must be some other way of entrance, for I saw one disappear close by the falling water. Yes, and there goes another!” I cried, as I held up the light. “Tom—Tom, they are the messengers of life! There is a way out yet!”





CHAPTER XXVII.

A JOURNEY IN THE DARK.

AGAIN the hope which animated our breasts chased away the sense of depression and fatigue, as, lighting our last candle to obtain a better light, we clambered as rapidly as we could high up towards where the water came roaring from its vast culvert, just as with a loud shriek a bird flew out, like some creature of shadow-land, from a niche which had hitherto escaped our notice.

The next moment, after a flit round the amphitheatre, it gave another shriek, and we saw it re-enter the niche and disappear.

That there was an outlet to the upper world there we now had no doubt, but the question arose which exit presented the least peril—the ascent to this niche right over the arch of the torrent, or the way back by the vault of the troubled waters, to swim for our lives down the little river.

We did not pause long to consider, but, drawing our breath hard, sought to climb up to where the bird had disappeared.

We needed the activity and power of some animal born to a climbing life, for it was a terrible task, over slippery,

spray-bedewed rocks, that seemed composed of ice. Our feet and hands slipped again and again, and more than once I felt that I must fall upon the bow of that torrent of inky water, at first by our side, soon right beneath us, and so be plunged into the seething cauldron below.

I found myself wondering whether, if I did so, my body would be forced through along some subterranean way to the vault of the troubled waters, from thence float out slowly along the little river, and so to the mouth of the cave and the outer sunshine.

Such thoughts were enough to unnerve one; but, bit by bit, we climbed on in safety, handing the candle from one to the other, and ever and anon stretching out a helping hand, till, how I cannot tell, we clung at length right over the falling torrent, with a piece of rock, smooth as the polishing of ages could make it, between us and the niche, which now proved to be a good-sized split separating a couple of rocks.

"You go first, Mas'r Harry," Tom whispered, with his mouth close to my ear. "I'll stand firm, and you can climb up my shoulders, and then lend me a hand."

I prepared to start, handing him the one candle we now had alight, when I gave utterance to a cry of despair; for the linen band which had crossed my breast, and supported the wallet, had been worn through by the constant climbing, and I suppose must have broken when I was making this last ascent. At all events, the wallet was gone—plunged, I expect, into the torrent, and bearing with it the flint, steel, tinder-box, and matches; so that, should any accident befall our one light, we should be in the horrible darkness of the place.

"Never mind, Mas'r Harry," said Tom. "It ain't no use crying after spilt milk. Up you go, sir."

With failing heart and knitted brow I exerted myself, climbed to Tom's hips, as he clung to the rock and lighted me; then to his shoulders; stood there for a moment trembling, and then struggled into the cleft, turned round, lay down in a horrible position, sloping towards the torrent, with my head two feet lower than my knees, and then stretched out my hands to Tom.

"Can't reach, Mas'r Harry," he said, after one or two despairing trials. "You'll have to go and leave me. See if you can get out and fetch help."

For a moment I felt stunned at this unforeseen termination of our efforts, for there really had seemed hope now, unless this fresh passage should prove too narrow to let us pass.

I did not answer Tom, but drew myself up again to think; when, taking off my coat, I rolled it round and round, laid fast hold of the collar, and then, once more lying down, I lowered the coat to Tom.

"Can you reach that?" I said.

"No, Mas'r Harry—not by a foot," said Tom gloomily, his words being shouted, as the roar of the torrent beneath us swept his voice away.

He stood in a position of awful peril: a false step, and he would be plunged into the torrent; and as I looked down at his upturned face and the flickering candle, I wondered how I could have ever dared to stand there myself.

"Can you reach it now?" I said, lowering myself a little more.

But his answer came in a dull, muffled, despairing monotone:

“No.”

I wriggled and shuffled my body a little more forward, forcing my boot toes into a crevice as I did so, for it seemed that now the slightest strain would draw me over the precipice. But there was no other resource: Tom must have help; and I lay shivering there as, with an upward spring, the candle between his teeth, Tom clutched my coat, I shuddering the while, and wondering whether the cloth would give way, or whether I should be drawn down.

We were looking straight into each other's eyeballs, lit by the guttering candle, as, with trial after trial, exerting the great muscular strength in his arms, Tom climbed higher and higher till he could touch my hands, my arms, and then hold on by my neck, when he stopped panting, just as, in his convulsive efforts, his teeth met through the candle, ground through the wick, and the upper portion fell far below into the torrent to leave us in that awful darkness.

“Hold fast, Mas'r Harry!” Tom hissed in my ear. “Crook your hands. No! Clasp 'em together, to give me a foothold.”

“Tom!” I groaned, “I'm slipping. I can hold on no longer.”

“A moment—a moment, Mas'r Harry,” he cried.

I clasped my fingers together, when, bending his body into a half circle, he got one foot into my hands, forced himself rapidly up, staying my downward progress of inch after inch, as the weight of his body pressed me to the rock; but as he turned to hold me in his turn, it was just as I felt myself going faster and faster, gliding head downwards towards the torrent.

Another struggle, and, wet and bleeding, I was by Tom's side, for him to hold tightly by one of my hands, as with the other he felt his way along slowly for some yards, when once more we sank upon the rocky floor, to lie panting, our breath drawn in hysterical sobs, and a darkness around that was too fearful even to contemplate.

Our despair was such that we could find no words; but at last Tom said, in a voice that I could hardly hear for the roar of the torrent, which seemed to be here condensed by the narrow passage:

"Mas'r Harry, I'll go first; follow close behind, and crawl."

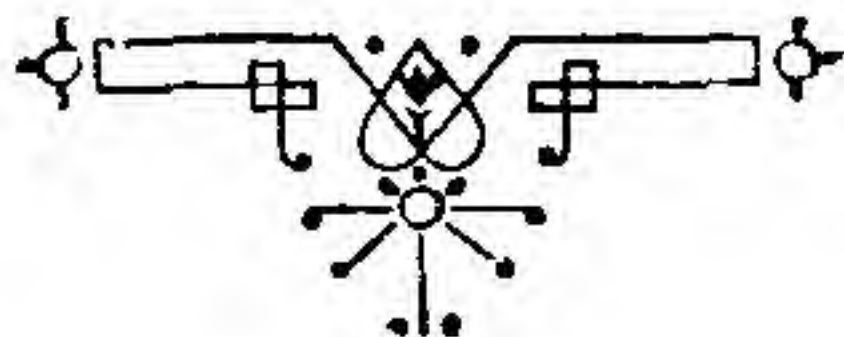
His words gave me energy, and we set off, crawling slowly, now upwards, now downwards, feeling every foot of the way, lest some new peril should lie in our path. The roar of the torrent rose and fell as we crept away, till by slow degrees it became fainter, fading to quite a soft murmur; but still no new horror assailed us. The dread darkness was forgotten in the hope that shed a light into our hearts, as foot by foot we progressed through what was sometimes a narrow passage, sometimes a wide vault, as we could tell by the echoing of our voices from its arched roof. In one of these, too, our ears were saluted by the shrieks of birds and the rushing of wings—a fact which told us we could not be very far from the light of day; but progress was so slow that I often despaired of seeing that light again.

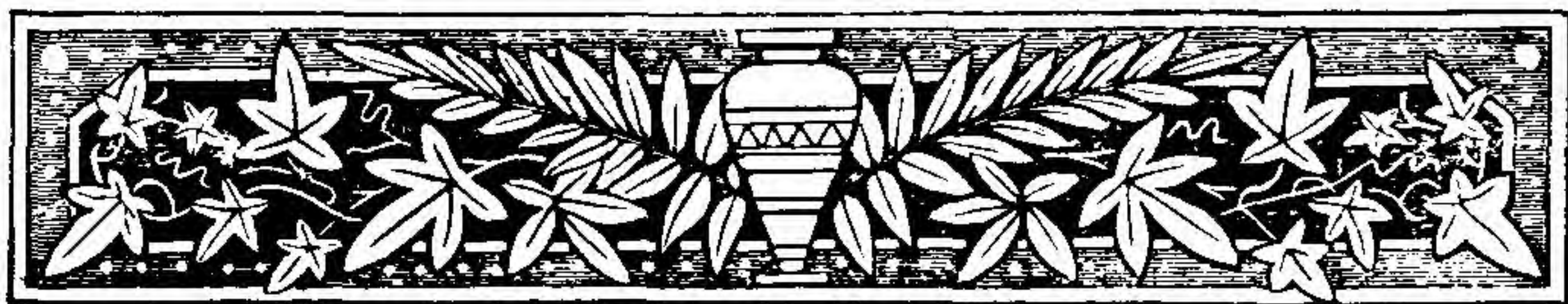
Often and often I could have lain down and cried like a child, and it required no weak effort to keep my emotion back.

"Seems to me, Mas'r Harry," said Tom at last, "this is

a very big place we're in, for the more I try about, the less I seem able to get on. Shall we rest a bit?"

Had Tom said, "Shall we keep on?" I should have made the same reply—"Yes." And then, as we extended our aching limbs upon the soft soil which covered the floor of the cave in this part, a delicious sense of tranquillity stole over me, and almost instantaneously I sank into a deep dreamless sleep.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

TO DAYLIGHT.

HOW long we lay in that stupor—more than sleep—I cannot tell; but I was awoke by Tom, and once more we slowly continued our journey, walking now though—for the absence of fresh perils had given us courage—and with our arms extended we went slowly on; but ever with the soft earth of the cave beneath our feet, and the stillness only broken by the occasional shriek of a bird.

“Say, Mas’r Harry,” said Tom after a long silence. “we are only wandering here and there without finding the passage to go out.”

“I have been thinking so too, Tom,” I said, as a thought struck me. Then loudly—“Look out, and see if you can make out anything when I fire: the flash may guide us.”

Taking out my pistol I fired upwards, when it was as if the whole cave were being crushed up together—thunder, roar, and bellow, in a deafening series of echoes—echoes succeeded by the rustling as of ten thousand wings, and shrieks that were deafening—noises which were quite a quarter of an hour in subsiding.

“We must be near to an opening, Tom,” I said, as soon as I could make myself heard.

"All right, Mas'r Harry, and I've seen it," he said cheerily. "This is a big place, hundreds of feet over, but the passage out lies here; that firing of the pistol was a good idea of yours."

He took my hand and stepped out boldly. Then feeling his way with caution, he exclaimed joyfully that he had found the opening, into which we stepped, and soon knew by the hollow sound that we were in a rapidly contracting passage.

From time to time I now flashed off a little powder in the pan of my pistol, in which instant we were able to see that we were in one of the riven passages of the cave, similar to those which we had before traversed; and, faint with hunger, we pressed on, till a distant murmur, ever increasing, forced itself upon my notice, and in a voice of despair I exclaimed:

"Oh, Tom, Tom! we are going back, my lad!"

"Mas'r Harry," he exclaimed, "don't be downhearted. 'Tis so, though; and I've been thinking it for the past quarter of an hour, but I wouldn't say it for I wasn't sure. Never mind, let's turn back. That's the big waterfall we can hear, sure enough. But we can step out bold now, as we know there's no danger; and when we are in the big place where we slept, a little powder will show us the way."

A weary walk and we were once more upon the soft earth of the cave where we had slept—the bird-chamber we called it—when, by means of flashing off powder, we arrived at a pretty good idea of the size of the place, and, better still, discovered a fresh outlet.

Danger and disappointment had made me now cautious, and I would not proceed until, by the expenditure of more

powder, we had made sure that there was no other passage; alarming the birds too, so that they swept round us like a hurricane.

"Right this time, Mas'r Harry," cried Tom.

Then we were once more on the way, crawling as to pace, as we felt our way cautiously along.

"If it ever fell out, Mas'r Harry, that we wanted a hiding-place, what a spot this would be!" said Tom, little thinking that the day was to come when it should prove the salvation of those who were our truest and best friends. "Why, I don't believe there's an Indian ever had the pluck to come a quarter as far, and we know it now well, every foot of it."

"Except the way out, Tom," I said sadly.

"Oh, that's right enough now, Mas'r Harry," he cried. "Cheer up: here's the birds flying along by the score. Can't you hear their wings whistle? They're some of those we frightened out coming back again."

I could hear the soft flap of wings plainly enough, and I could not help feeling hopeful as we toiled on, till suddenly Tom exclaimed:

"Keep back!"

"What is it?" I exclaimed, our voices echoing in a way which told us that the cave had once more opened out.

"My leg goes down as far as I can reach here, Mas'r Harry. There's a hole of some kind. Stop till I flash off a bit of powder."

I stood firm, while Tom was busy for a few moments, during which I heard the click of his flask. Then there were sparks as he snapped off his flint-lock pistol, but for a few times without effect; but at last he started a train of powder which burned brightly, showing us that we

stood on a ledge some fifty feet above where there was the flash of water and many a grotesque rock.

"Why, Tom?"

"Why, Mas'r Harry?"

"Down on your knees!" I cried joyfully as I set the example.

For we were in the first extensive widening out of the cave, at about five hundred yards from its mouth, having emerged through an opening hitherto unknown to us from its being upon a ledge forty or fifty feet above the floor, where in that part it ran on a level with the little river.

We rose from our knees, weak as two children, and contrived to scramble down to the bottom, along which we stumbled slowly and without energy towards the cave's mouth, going back first to where we had left our guns. Turn after turn, winding after winding, we traversed, and there was the faint dawning of light in the distance—light which grew more and more bright and glorious as we advanced, shading our eyes with our hands, till, utterly worn out, we sank down close to the entrance amongst the soft, warm, luxurious sand, when I gazed at the pale, haggard, blood-smeared face beside me, to exclaim:

"Tom, is that you?"

"Mas'r Harry," he replied hoarsely, "poor Missus wouldn't know you if she was here."

It was the noon of the third day, we afterwards learned, that we had spent in these realms of darkness, and never did the bright face of nature look more glorious than it did to our aching eyes. But in spite of the intense sensation of gnawing hunger we could not proceed till we had

rested. Then after bathing our faces, hands, and feet in the cold stream, we slowly journeyed to the hacienda.

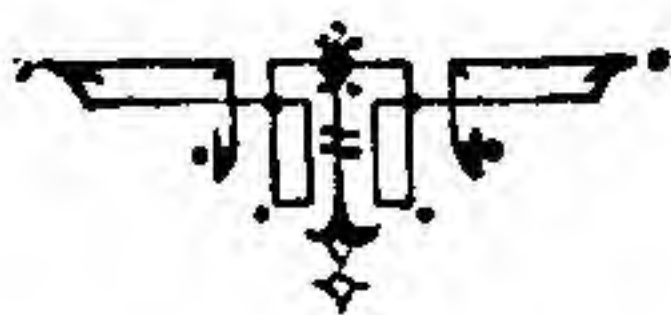
"Don't say a word about the cave, Tom," I said, as we neared home.

"No, Mas'r Harry, not if you don't wish it," he rejoined, looking at me wonderingly.

"I have a reason, Tom," I said. "We can say that we have been exploring, and that will be true, and will satisfy them."

"You ain't done with the cave yet, then, Mas'r Harry?"

"No, Tom," I said, "not yet."





CHAPTER XXIX.

A QUESTION.

THE look I received from Lilla that evening was one which, while it reproached me, made my heart leap. But all the same, I did not respond to it: I dared not; and I sat there answering my uncle's questions and telling him of our discovery of the ruined temple, but no more; while Garcia, who was present, smiled a contemptuous smile that was most galling.

For that smile seemed to mean so much, and to say, "Look at this crazy vagabond, how he spends his time!"

I was too weak and ill, though, to resent it, and gladly sought my bed, which I did not leave for a couple of days, being tended most affectionately during that time by Mrs. Landell.

We had made our entrance to the hacienda by night, as I had wished on account of our appearance, and it was well we did so, for an inspection of the clothes I had worn displayed such a scarecrow suit as would have ensured the closing of any respectable door in my face.

But if, when I rose from my couch, my clothes were worn, so was not my spirit, and during the long hours I

had lain there my brain had been as active as ever concerning the buried treasures.

The terrors of the cave were great, certainly, but then I reasoned that three parts of them were due to ignorance. Had we been acquainted with the geography of the place, as we were now, and taken common precautions, we might have saved ourselves the hairbreadth escapes and agony of mind that had so told upon us—we need not have risked our lives by the great gulf, nor yet in the vault of the troubled waters. With a short portable ladder and a knotted rope the ascent to the rift over the torrent in the great amphitheatre would have been easy. And altogether it seemed to me that another visit, well prepared for, would not be either arduous or terrible.

The visit, of course, would be to search for the treasure; and calm reflection seemed to teach me that it was very probable that we had now hit upon the part that appeared likely to have been used for the purpose—so I thought. I could not feel that the timid, superstitious Indians would ever have penetrated so far as we did, but the soft earth of the bird-chamber seemed, after all, a most likely place.

“What! going again, Mas’r Harry?” said Tom when I broached the subject.

“Yes, Tom,” I said; “I want to explore this bird-chamber part of the cave. And besides, we need run no risks this time—we need not go into the terrible parts.”

“Very good, Mas’r Harry; only reck’lect about the pitcher as goes so often to the well getting broken at last.”

“But you’ll go with me, Tom?” I said.

“Go with you, Mas’r Harry? Course I will! I should

just like to catch you going without me. Don't you get coming none of them games."

The result of this was that one morning, soon after sunrise, Tom and I were climbing over the rocks that barred the mouth of the cave. We had plenty of provision and plenty of candle. Each man, too, carried his own tinder-box and a small coil of knotted cotton rope, which served as a girdle, and so was not allowed to encumber our movements.

Light-hearted and eager, I led the way, and we pushed right in past the rift on the ledge which led to the bird-chamber, for we were anxious to see what had become of our raft.

It was just as I anticipated: we found it self-anchored between two blocks of stone within fifty yards of the tunnel-arch; and landing it, we cut the leather thongs, let out the wind, and then hid the whole affair behind some rocks—in case, as Tom said, we might want it again.

A rest and a slight attack upon the provisions, and we were once more journeying towards the mouth, but only to pause in the chamber where lay the opening that had saved our lives.

A little agility took us to the mouth of the rift; and now, candle in hand, we could see the passage through which we had travelled so laboriously, to find it the easiest of any crevice we had traversed, the floor being deeply covered with guano, as was the case with the bird-chamber when we entered it, at last, to find a vast hall of irregular shape, swarming with the guacharo, or butter-bird of South America—a great night-jar, passing its days in these fastnesses of nature, but sallying out at

dark to feed. The uproar they made was tremendous, and several times I thought that our lights would be extinguished, though we escaped that trouble and continued our search.

The floor was nearly level, and the roof, like the others in the cave, covered with stalactites; but the birds and their nests completely robbed the place of beauty or grandeur.

An hour spent here convinced me that we knew the two only passages leading from the place, so we continued our investigations, travelling along the farther passage till the sound of the great waterfall smote upon our ears, but still nothing rewarded our search though we went to the end.

A passage of the most rugged nature, but a passage only, with nothing in the shape of branch or outlet save into the amphitheatre, into which we had no desire to penetrate. Certainly the passage widened out into a chamber with glistening roof here and there, but with rocky floors, and presenting nothing striking as likely to reward my search.

At the end of a couple of hours we were back in the bird-chamber (I continue to call the places by the names that first struck us as suitable), when we sat down for another rest and time of refreshing, for we had no peril to dread this time; and now, once more, I began to think over with damped spirits the possibility of finding what might have been here concealed. Treasures, the wealth of nations, might have lain hidden for ages, with the guano continually accumulating to bury them deeper and deeper; but were they buried there?

I would try and prove it, at all events; and rousing

myself from my musing fit I took a sharp-pointed rod with which I had come provided, and began to probe the soil, Tom watching me earnestly the while.

But nothing rewarded my endeavours. I probed till I was tired, and then Tom took up the task, but always for the rod to go down as far as we liked in the soft, yielding earth.

At last I told him to give up, for the possibility of success seemed out of the question. Fatigue had robbed me of my sanguine thoughts, and wearily I led the way back to the mouth of the cave, and we again had a rest, Tom lighting his pipe, and I gladly seeking the solace of a doze.

Rest and refreshment had their usual effect, and I was soon up again and at work with the rod, thrusting it down into the sand all over the place, till in one spot it struck upon something hard, and my heart leaped; but a little tapping of the hard matter showed that it was nothing but a mass of rock some four feet below the sand.

I sat down again, hot and ill-tempered; when Tom tapped the ashes out of his pipe and stood before me.

"Now, what is it you're really after, Mas'r Harry?" he said. "Not gold, is it? Why don't you be open with a fellow?"

"What makes you ask, Tom?" I said suspiciously.

"Because they do say, Mas'r Harry, that the folks that used to live here got to bury their stuff, to keep it out of the Don's hands."

Always the same tradition! But I made no answer, for a fresh thought had struck me—one of those bright ideas that in all ages have been the making of men's for-

tunes; and, leaping up, I seized the rod and ran to where the stream, inky no longer, but clear and bright, ran sparkling in the subdued light over its sandy bed towards the open sunshine.

Wading in, I turned up my sleeves and began to thrust my iron probe down here into the soft sand, for I had argued now like this: that after carefully considering where would be the best place to hide their treasure, the priests of old might have been cunning enough to think that the simpler the concealment the less likely for it to be searched, and thus with the dim mysterious caverns beyond offering all kinds of profundities—spots that could certainly be suspected—they might have chosen the open mouth of the cave, and buried that which they sought to save in the bed of the little stream.

The thought seemed to take away my breath for a few moments, it came so vividly; the next minute I was wading about, thrusting the rod down as far as I could in the wet sand; but always with the same result—the iron went down easily to my hand and was as easily withdrawn.

I probed right in as I waded amongst the gloomy parts and then went on to where it became dark, but still I was not discouraged, but came slowly back towards where the barrier of rocks blocked the entrance, down beneath which the little stream plunged to reappear some yards on the other side; and here in the most open part of all, but screened from the sight of any one in the valley—here, where the water formed a little pool beneath the creeper-matted rocks, I gave the rod a hard thrust down as far as it could be driven, bending so that my shoulder was beneath the water, when my heart leaped and then beat

tumultuously, for the rod touched something. I tried again.

Yes, there was something beneath the sand!

Was it rock—stone?

I tried again; tapping with the iron.

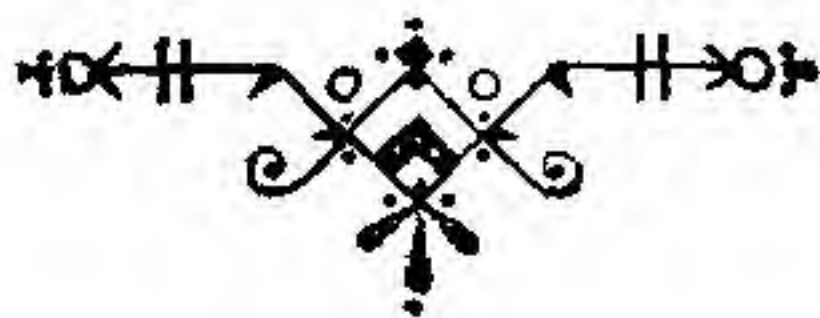
No; it was not stone!

Was it metal?

I tried again, after examining the point of the rod, and this time drove it down fiercely.

Yes, it was metal; but the question to solve was this—

Was it gold?





CHAPTER XXX.

FOUND.

MY excitement was intense; and all dripping as I was with the icy water, I leaped out on to the sand with the intention of climbing over the barrier out into the bright sunshiny vale, to cut a long, thin bamboo with which to probe the sand in a more satisfactory manner.

Then I stopped short, as the recollection of Tom's words flashed across my brain. His surmises might be correct; and, cautious as we had been, watchers might have seen our goings and comings, while my stepping out into the vale now to cut a pole would show that I had some particular object in view.

Another minute, though, and with my mind teeming with thoughts of rich ingots, plates, and vessels of gold, I began to consider as to what ought to be my next step. Without testing further I felt that I had been successful—that a wonderful stroke of good fortune had rewarded my efforts; and then, how was I to dig it from its wet, sandy bed and get it safely to the hacienda?

"Tom," I cried excitedly, "I have not spoken sooner lest you should think me an empty dreamer; but I have found that which I sought."

"Sure, Mas'r Harry?"

"Well—a—well, yes, nearly, Tom," I stammered, somewhat taken aback by his coolness; "and now I want you to swear that you will take no unfair advantage of what you have seen or may see in the progress of this adventure."

"Want *me* to do *what*, Mas'r Harry?" said Tom sturdily.

"I want you to swear—"

"Then I ain't agoing to swear, nor nothing of the kind; so you need not think it. If I ain't worth trusting send me back; leastwise, you won't do that, because I sha'n't go. But, howsoever, I ain't agoing to go swearing and taking oaths, and, there! be quiet! Look there, Mas'r Harry. Make him swear if you like. No, not that way, more off to the left. Turn your eye just past them three big trees by the lump of rock. That ain't a deer this time, but some one on the look-out. Two on 'em, that there are!"

I glanced in the pointed-out direction, to see plainly that a couple of Indian heads were strained towards us, as if their owners were narrowly watching for our appearance; though I knew from the gloom beneath the arch where Tom was seated that we must be invisible to any one standing out there in the glow of the bright afternoon sunshine.

What did it mean? Were these emissaries of Garcia watching my every act; or were they descendants of the Peruvian priests possessed of the secret of the buried treasures.

I shrank back farther into the cavern to crouch down, Tom imitating my acts, and together we watched the

watchers, who remained so motionless that at times I felt disposed to ask myself whether I had not been mistaken, and whether these were not a portion of one of the rocks.

"It's no good, Mas'r Harry," said Tom; "we must make a rush for it. They'll stop there for a week, or till we go. 'Tain't nothing new; there's always some one after you; and if you've found anything I can't see how you're going to get it away. Let's go now, before it gets evening, for they'll never move till we do."

"But the—"

"Well, they ain't obliged to know that we've found that, Mas'r Harry," said Tom smiling. "We don't know it ourselves yet. What we've got to do is to play bold, shoot one or two of the birds as they dodge about farther in, then knock off a few of those pretty bits of white stone hanging from the roof, and they'll think that we've come after curiosities.

Tom's advice was so sound that I led the way farther into the cave, where we made the place echo, as if about to fall upon our heads, as we had a couple of shots, each bringing down six of the guacharo birds. Then re-loading, we secured three handsome long stalactites, white and glittering, and thus burdened we took our departure, walking carelessly and laughing and examining our birds, Tom stopping coolly to light his pipe just as we were abreast of where we had seen the Indians.

It was bold if the watchers' intentions were inimical, and we gave ourselves the credit of having thrown them off the scent, for we saw no more of them that evening; returning tired and excited to the hacienda to find my uncle quiet and cordial, for he seemed to be giving me the credit of trying to break myself off my inclination.



CHAPTER XXXI.

THE HIDALGO'S DIGNITY UPSET.

THAT night I forgot all past perils as I dreamed of gold—swimming in it—rolling in it—for it seemed to possess all the qualities of quicksilver, and whenever I tried to hold it or sweep it up it all escaped through my fingers.

I woke at last with a start, with my chest heaving, and my face and limbs bathed with a cold, dank perspiration.

As far as I could judge it wanted a couple of hours to daybreak; but I felt too much agitated to try and sleep again. So rising and hurrying on my clothes, I sat there, hour after hour, thinking and planning my future course, for a night's rest had not weakened my convictions.

The determination I came to at last was, that I could not do better than smother my impatience for a whole week; taking, the while, excursions in every other direction so as, if possible, to blind any one who made a study of my movements. Then my journey to the cavern must be made by night, armed with spades, and taking with us a couple of mules to bring home the spoil.

So I mused, little recking of what was to come, till the great golden sun rose from his glorious bed, when, after

lying down an hour for the sake of the rest, I rose and sought for Tom, to find him indulging in that bad habit of his, a morning pipe; when I told him my plans, and also asked him if he thought that we ought to take my uncle into our confidence.

“Not by no means, Mas’r Harry,” he said.

“I may depend on you, Tom, of course?” I said,

“Depend on me, Mas’r Harry? Ah! I should think so. There never was nobody couldn’t stick to no one no tighter than I’ll stick to you. There won’t be no getting rid of me; so don’t never think so no more. What you say is quite right, and we’ll wait a week. If no one ain’t touched that stuff for three hundred years they’ll leave it alone another week. I’ll be on the lookout for a couple of mules and spades, and we’ll go, like the forty thieves, to the enchanted cavern, eh, Mas’r Harry? I’ll get ’em, and we’ll put them into the little wood under the mountain side, eh? and keep ’em there till it’s dark, when we’ll start. A week to-day, or a week to-morrow?”

“A week to-day, Tom,” I said; “and if you’ll hang about here, I’ll tell you what time we’ll go for a shooting trip.”

We had a roam after breakfast, and then, returning to the mid-day meal, I spent some time about the plantation, when, feeling tired and overcome with the heat, I went into the house, lay down upon the couch in the darkened room, and, I suppose, from the effects of past fatigue, soon dropped off into a sound slumber.

I have some recollection of hearing voices and a low, buzzing sound that, in my confused state, seemed somehow to be mixed up with gold. Then it was Lilla’s

beautiful golden hair, and I was seeing it spread out and floating once more upon the surface of the river. Then I was wide awake, for I had heard Garcia's voice utter my name with an intensity of bitterness that made me shudder as I rose upon my elbow.

"I tell you he goes to the Indian villages, where there are dark-skinned maidens. I know it; and then he comes back here, pretending to be ill and tired with his travels."

"It is not true!" I heard Lilla exclaim angrily. "And if he were here now——"

"But he is not here now," said Garcia sneeringly. "He has some assignation in the moonlit woods with one of his dark beauties, with fire-flies in her hair and flashing eyes, such as those cold-blooded Englishmen love."

"It is false!" cried Lilla; "and if he were here you would not dare to say it."

"Look here!" he said. "I will be played with no longer. I have been calm and patient while this English dog has come in here to insult and try to supplant me. He has always been placed before me since the day he set foot in the plantation. Your mother is my debtor, and you are promised to me. Let there be any more of this trifling, and I will bring down ruin upon the place. I have sued gently and tenderly, but it is useless. Now I will show you that I am master; promise me now that you will speak to him no more, or——"

I never knew what threat Garcia would have uttered for just then running forward I dashed out my clenched fist with all my might, and with a crash the Don went down over a chair just as my uncle and Mrs. Landell ran into the room.

“What does this mean?” exclaimed my uncle angrily, as Lilla ran, sobbing, to her mother.

“He struck me!” cried Garcia furiously, as he scrambled up. “He has insulted me—a hidalgo of Spain—and I’ll have his blood!”

“Better go and wash your face clear of your own,” I said contemptuously, as I suffered from an intense longing to go and kick him. “He was rude to my cousin, Uncle, and I knocked him down. That’s all.”

With a savage scowl upon his face Garcia made for the door, turned to shake his fist at me, and he was gone.

“Hal,” said my uncle gently—“Hal, my boy, I’d have given a year of my life sooner than this should have happened. You don’t know these half-blood Spaniards as I do. You don’t know what mischief may befall us all through your rashness.”

“I wonder that you admit him to your house, Uncle!” I exclaimed hotly, for anger was getting the better of discretion.

I was sorry, though, the next minute; for, on hearing my words, my uncle glanced in a troubled way at his wife, who was trying to soothe poor weeping Lilla; while, during the next hour, I learned that I had had the misfortune to strike down the man who was my uncle’s creditor to a large amount, as he had been Mrs. Landell’s, or they would not have allowed his attentions to Lilla.

“I’m ashamed of it all, my boy,” said my uncle; “but he holds our future entirely in his hands, and he looks for the receipt of Lilla’s little dowry as part payment of the debts. I’ve struggled very hard against ruin, Hal, and now it seems that it must come. But after all, I don’t know that I’m sorry, for it would have been a cruel thing

—like selling that poor child. But when a man is embarrassed as I am, what can he do? And besides, we both thought at one time that Lilla had a leaning towards him. It was when he seemed to come forward generously with his money, which I was foolish enough to take. But there, let it pass; and I repeat, mind, Hal, that I cannot allow matters to go on between you and Lilla. All will be at an end with Garcia, I suppose, and we shall have to turn out; but I cannot encourage you. I must begin again, I suppose.”

“Uncle,” I said, “I am deeply grieved that my coming should work such evil in the place,” for my anger had now evaporated. “I ask your pardon for bringing such trouble upon your house. I could not help loving Lilla; to see her was to do that; and even now, if I saw that fellow brutally using his strength against her, I should feel obliged to strike him.”

“Things must take their course, Harry,” said my uncle; “and I don’t know that, after all, I am very much grieved. We have seen the man now in his true colours, and I learn that one of those colours is that which is worn by a coward. But while you stay, Harry, beware! Garcia has sworn that he’ll have your blood, and he will!”

“Yes, Uncle,” I said quietly, “if he can!”

“Just so, Harry; but take care.”

“I’ll be on my guard, Uncle,” I replied.

And then I left him to go and think, my pulses throbbing as I thought of the exciting turn my adventures were taking—the event of the last hour—my discovery, if such it could be called; and I longed for the time when I could put it to the proof.



CHAPTER XXXII.

NOT QUITE.

THE time glided on, and I saw no more of Garcia; but, all the same, I could not help feeling that this calm might portend a storm.

My uncle was evidently very uneasy; but he said no more, merely proceeding with his business as usual, while with Tom I took trips here and there, making myself *certainly now no burden*, for we returned each evening loaded with game of some description — deer, fowl, or fish.

The first two days I saw at different times that we were followed; but afterwards it seemed that the spies, self-constituted or not, had given up their task, and that we were free to roam the forest as we pleased.

I grew hopeful upon making this discovery, and longingly looked forward for the night of our great adventure.

It seemed as if that night would never come, but it came at last.

Instead of going to my bed-room I stole out directly I had seen my uncle take his last cigar; and knowing that my absence would not be noticed, I made my way to the appointed place.

It was excessively dark—a favourable omen, I thought;

and on reaching the little wood there was Tom smoking his pipe, with the bowl inside his jacket, though, had the ruddy glow been seen at a distance, it might easily have been taken for the lanthorn of a fire-fly.

"Seen any one, Tom?" I whispered.

"Not a soul, sir."

"Have you got all we want?"

"I believe you, Mas'r Harry. Two spades, two mules, plenty to eat and drink, plenty of powder and lead, and coffee-bags enough—brand-new ones of your uncle's—to put in all the treasure we shall find."

I could not see Tom's face, but I felt sure that he was indulging in a good grin. However, I said nothing; but enjoining caution, we each took the bridle of a mule and began to thread our way cautiously amongst the trees, taking the precaution of setting off in an opposite direction to that we intended afterwards to pursue.

It was a strange and a weird journey, but we went on hour after hour, and nothing molested us. About midnight we halted to let the beasts graze for half an hour in a grassy vale, while we did what Tom called the same; our pasture being cake, and our drink spirit and water.

Refreshed by our short halt, we again journeyed, and from time to time, after giving Tom the bridle of my mule, I stayed back to listen and try to discover whether we were followed; but, save the cry of some beast, there was nothing to be heard.

About two hours after midnight we struck the little stream, and soon after were well in the ravine, when, for the purpose of exercising greater caution, and, as Tom said, running the risk of being stung, we each took the bridle of our mule over one arm and went down on

all fours, crawling forward; and so slow was our progress that, were we watched and a glimpse of us obtained, I felt certain that we must be taken for a little herd slowly grazing towards the mouth of the great cavern.

We reached the rocky pass at last, and then, muffling the feet of the mules with the coffee-bags, we took them cautiously on—the intelligent beasts clambering carefully and with hardly a sound—when we led them right in for some distance, gave them the maize we had brought, and then sat down in the darkness listening to their crunching of the grain and the loud cries of the guacharo birds as they flew in and out, fortifying ourselves the while with a hearty meal—Tom foregoing his pipe for reasons of cautious tendency.

According to my calculations the day would break in about an hour's time; and during that hour, but always on the alert, we stretched ourselves upon the sand to rest, listening to every sound; for there was the possibility, we knew, of there being enemies, biped or quadruped, within a few yards of where we rested.

Towards daybreak it turned intensely cold—colder than I could have imagined possible in a tropic land; but we were prepared to bear cold as well as danger, for a fire would, of course, have been inviting observation.

Day at last; with a glorious flush of light reaching down the valley, and making the stalactites on the roof to glisten. But our ideas now were bent on the object we had in view, and nature's magnificence was unnoticed.

As soon as the light had penetrated sufficiently, we led the mules farther in, and secured them in the broad passage, so that they could reach the water of the stream; our next step being to creep cautiously to the rocky

barrier, and, well sheltering ourselves, to watch long and carefully for some sign of spies.

We did so for a full hour, but the silence of the place was even awful. Then the gray dawn brightened into the sweet fresh morning, with the heavy dew glistening in the sunshine as it dripped from the great tropic leaves—otherwise all was still; and convinced at length that those who had hitherto dogged our steps had for this time been eluded, I made a sign to Tom; and going in about fifty yards, we seized our spades and began to throw the light soil and sand into the bed of the little stream, shovelful after shovelful, so as to form a dam, which was at first washed down nearly as fast as we piled it up; but at last our efforts were successful, and the dammed-up water began to flow aside, cutting for itself a new channel through the sand, and making its exit a few feet nearer the rocky barrier, but taking up its former course on the other side.

We rested then for a few minutes, faint and hot; but the excitement of the quest took from us the sense of fatigue, for the water had all drained away from the bed of the stream, and the little pool close under the rocky barrier now presented the appearance of a depression whose bottom was covered with a beautifully clean sand.

I had come provided this time with a longer rod, and, taking it in my trembling hands, I stood for a few moments upon the sand, anxious, but dreading to force it down lest it should be to prove that I had been deceived by my over-sanguine nature.

Then, rousing myself, I thrust the rod down, when, at the depth of four feet, it came in contact with some obstacle.

Drawing it up I tried again and again, Tom eagerly watching the while, as I proved to a certainty that there was something buried in the sand, extending over a space of about three feet by two, while elsewhere I could force the rod down to the depth of over five feet without let or hindrance.

"Try yourself, Tom," I said hoarsely, as I passed to him the rod, which he seized eagerly, and thrust down; while trembling with excitement I cautiously climbed the barrier, beneath which lay the hole, and peered over the rocks into the valley.

Not a leaf moving—all hot and still in the morning sun; and I returned to Tom.

"Well?" I said eagerly.

"Well," echoed Tom; "I should think it is well! There is something buried here, Mas'r Harry, and it ain't rocks, nor stones, nor wood. I fancy it's a lead coffin, for it feels like it with the point of the rod."

"Nonsense!" I said impatiently. "There would be no lead coffins here, Tom."

"We'll see, anyhow, Mas'r Harry," he exclaimed. And seizing a spade he began to hurl the sand out furiously. "There's a something down here, that's certain," he panted out between the spadefuls, "but what it is goodness knows. All I can say is that it's a something."

"Let me come too, Tom," I cried excitedly.

"No, I sha'n't, Mas'r Harry!" he exclaimed. "There ain't room for both of us to work at once, and we shall only be tripping one another up. Let me work a spell, and then you can take a turn."

Tom dug away at a tremendous rate, the wet sand cutting out firmly and easily, and soon the hole grew

deep and wide, when, suddenly resting, Tom looked up at me.

"Say, Mas'r Harry," he said, just as I leaped down into the hole, "go and see if there's anybody coming."

"No," I said, looking at him suspiciously; "go you."

"Course I will, Mas'r Harry!" he exclaimed. "But say, what a s'picious sort of a fellow you do get."

Then, jumping out, he took his turn at inspecting the ravine, peering cautiously through the creepers that covered the rocks, while I toiled hard at the spade, throwing up the wet sand

"Don't throw no more this side, Mas'r Harry," said Tom on his return. "Pitch it the other way. It's been falling into the water and making it thick, so as it will go running down and telling everybody as we're at work in here."

Tom's words made me leap out of the hole.

"Gracious, Tom!" I exclaimed, "what a fool I am!"

"Well, Mas'r Harry," said Tom bluntly, "I did think as you was just now, over that s'picion o' yourn; but as to throwing the sand into the water, why, one can't foresee everything. I don't think there's any harm done, though."

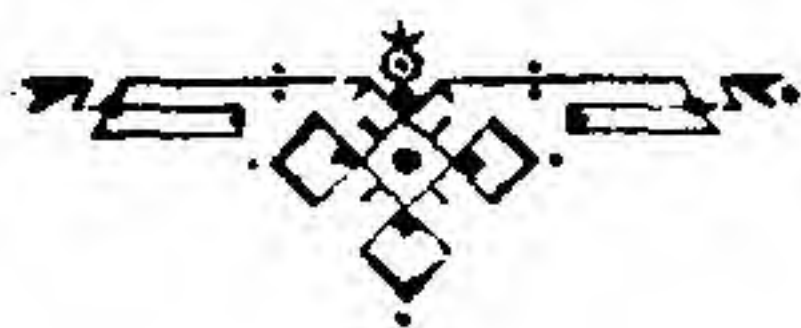
"I beg your pardon, Tom," I exclaimed, holding out my hand, "it was ungenerous."

"All right, Mas'r Harry," he said, taking my hand awkwardly, as if I had given him something to look at, and then he seemed to give it to me back again, when, once more turning to our task, we threw out the sand close under the rocky barrier, and it was well we did so, as will be seen in the end.

"There's something here. I can feel it with my spade, Mas'r Harry," exclaimed Tom suddenly.

And then, moved by the same tremulous nervous feeling as myself, he leapt out, and together we once more searched the vale with our eyes, to see nothing, though, but the same flagging leaves and the quivering motion of the bright transparent air. But as we descended once more, a snorting, whinnying noise from the mules came from within, and in our excitement and alarm we were about to thrust in the sand again to bury our treasure, only reason told us of the folly of the act.

Spade in hand we ran into the gloom, and followed the winding of the track to where the mules were tethered, to find them uneasy and straining at their halters, as if something had alarmed them.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

MICA OR GOLD.

“**A**H! there’s some one about, Mas’r Harry, I’m ‘fear’d,” whispered Tom. “I wish we’d covered the stuff up again. What do you say to taking a light and going right in?”

Tom’s advice seemed so sensible that we ran back, fetched a candle and the matches, got a light, and then carefully examined the cave, peering wherever it seemed possible for any one to hide.

But our search was in vain, though we penetrated right to the point on the great gulf, and peered into the dark arch. As far as we could see all was silent, solemn, and grand, and we had nothing to fear from behind us while we worked.

“Well, it’s been a deal of bother, Mas’r Harry; but it’s better than thinking every moment that there’s some one going to jump out on you.”

The mules were quiet as we passed them on our way back, and we then inspected the valley from the spot we called our observatory, but all was still; and hastily seizing a spade, I was once more digging away, Tom casting aside the sand I threw out.

The edge of the spade touched something now every

time I thrust it in. I had but to stoop and force in my fingers to feel the buried object; but moved by that spirit which induces people to examine so carefully the outside of a strange letter, when the interior is at their disposal, I feasted expectancy for a few minutes longer, telling myself that I would carefully clear out all the sand before I tried to ascertain what our treasure might be.

That was an exciting period, and I can picture it all even now: the great cave, with its vast arch protruding right over the barrier, so that we were toiling in the shadow of the huge vault, filled by day with an ever-deepening golden mellow gloom—a gloom deepening into blackness in the far depths; the trickling water, fresh from its mysterious source in the great amphitheatre; our splashed and stained figures, toiling together now in the pit we had dug; and the friendly scuffle which took place when, the sand being well cleared out, Tom stooped, but only to be arrested by my hand.

“No,” I exclaimed, “let me, Tom!”

Then, with painfully throbbing heart I bent down, the blood seeming to flush to my head so as to nearly blind me.

The next moment my fingers were groping about amongst the sand and water.

“Be quick, Mas’r Harry, please, or I shall bust!” cried Tom, just as my fingers encountered something hard.

With a cry of joy I rose up, to exhibit to the staring eyes of Tom Bulk a glittering yellow stone.

“Gold, Tom—gold!” I exclaimed. “And here’s more and more!”

I stooped down, to bring up two, three, four more lumps of the same glittering yellow stone.

"No, 'tain't, Mas'r Harry," said Tom, gruffly, as he turned over one of the fragments in his hand. "That ain't gold at all; that's what they calls mica. I allers rec'lect the name, cause it's the same as one of the prophets we used to read about at school. You might get plenty of that in the rocks, without much trouble. It's just the same stuff as some mates of mine once got out of a gravel pit at home, and they took it to the watchmaker in the town, and they says to him, 'What's that gold worth?' they says. 'Which gold?' he says. 'Why, that,' they says. 'That's no more gold than you are,' he says; 'that's mica.' And then he told them that they might allers tell gold in a moment, by pulling out a knife and trying to cut it, when if it was gold it would cut easy like, just the same as a piece of lead. Try that, Mas'r Harry."

Snatching out my knife, I cut at one of the pieces of yellow stone, to find it splinter under the keen edge of my blade.

"I'll swear, though, that the pynt of that rod hit something else besides them bits of stone, Mas'r Harry. Try again; or, no—let me try."

The disappointment was so keen, that for a few moments I was speechless, and offered no opposition to Tom, who began to grope about with both hands to bring up dozens more pieces of the micaceous rock, and then a piece of flint that seemed to have been chipped into shape, and then a long obsidian blade.

"We're a-coming to something after all, Mas'r Harry," said Tom. "Here's a cur'osity, and here—here—here's—pah! I don't like handling them."

As he spoke, Tom held out to my view three or four

blackened bones, which he threw down again amongst the sand and water at the bottom.

"We shall come to the leaden coffin after all, Mas'r Harry," he said. "This has been a berryin' place after a fight, p'r'aps; but is it worth while to disturb it?"

I did not answer, for my attention had been taken up by a slight sound towards the interior of the cave.

"Here, quick, Tom!" I exclaimed.

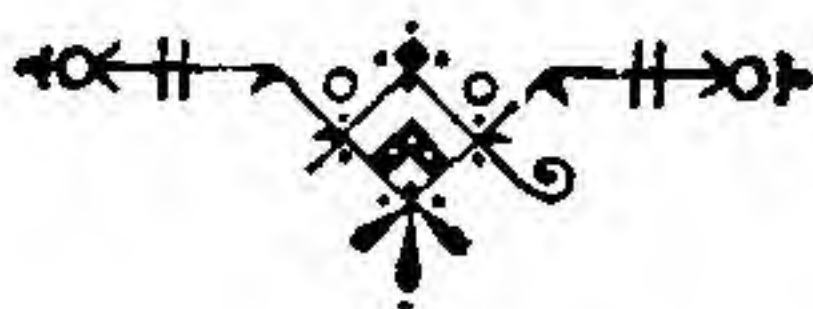
He leaped out in an instant, just as, with a fierce rush, the pent-up water conquered our little dam, took to its old bed, and swept down sand and soil, filling up our pit in a few minutes as it bore all before it, and then subsided quietly into its former course, the sand sucking up the moisture where it had levelled; and to a casual observer the cave seemed as if it had been untouched for ages.

"Well that's pleasant, certainly," said Tom coolly; "but 'taint so bad as it might have been. We haven't got wet. Never mind, Mas'r Harry, we'll have it out again by-and-by. There's more in that hole yet than we have seen. Them bits of yaller stuff weren't put in for nothing. But let's go up again to the prog and have a good feed before we begin again; and, suppose you bring your spade?"

I followed Tom mechanically, spade in hand, to where, behind a mass of rock, we had made our storehouse, and seating ourselves in the gloomy shade I was busily opening my wallet, when Tom, who was getting some maize for the mules, suddenly pressed my shoulder and pointing in the direction of the cave's mouth, I heard him whisper the one word:

"Look!"

I looked, with my eyes seeming to be glued to the spot, as slowly there appeared above the rugged line formed by the top of the rocky barrier a human head, another, and another, with intervals of a dozen yards between each; and then they remained motionless, gazing straight forward into the great cavern.





CHAPTER XXXIV.

OUR WORK RENEWED.

COULD they see us, or could they not?

It was a hard trial sitting there motionless, wondering whether those eager, searching eyes could penetrate as far through the gloom as where we sat. It seemed they could not, as, for full ten minutes, their owners rested there peering over the massive rocks.

The least movement on our part, a whinny or a snort from the mules, would have been sufficient to have betrayed our whereabouts, and bloodshed would, perhaps, have followed; but all remained still, save once, when I heard Tom's gun-lock give a faint click just as first one and then another head was being withdrawn.

"There, Mas'r Harry," said Tom in a whisper. "What do you think of that? They're on the look-out for us, you see. And we got grumbling about the little dam breaking, when what did it break to do? Why, to smooth over the rough work we had done, so as those copper-coloured gentlemen shouldn't see it and make a row. But, say Mas'r Harry, I a'most wonder they didn't see the water look thick. P'raps they will yet, so I wouldn't move.

Tom's advice was so good that we sat for quite a couple of hours, when I told him of the plans I had made.

"Tom," I said, "it was an act of folly for us to be working there without one of us watching. I tell you what we must do, we must rest till it begins to grow dusk, and then begin working in the dark. Do you see?"

"Well, I can see now, Mas'r Harry," said Tom grinning; "but I don't see how I'm going to see then. How so be: just as you like. I'm ready when you are."

The afternoon passed, the sun disappeared behind the mountains, and the dark shadows began to fall, just as with a loud shriek bird after bird winged its way out of the cavern for its nightly quest of food. We stole to the barrier, looked long and cautiously down the valley, and then set to work in the dim and fast-fading light to dam the stream—this time taking the precaution to lay lumps of rock and stalactites in the bed to support our embankment of sand and earth; when once more the stream took another course, the bed was dry, and in silence we stepped down to the site of our former labours.

I was not so sanguine now of the toil proving remunerative; but from the little knowledge I possessed of the Indian's superstitious character I felt pretty sure that they would not venture by night to a cavern whose interior was clothed by them with endless mysterious terrors, though it possessed terrors enough, as we well knew, without the aid of superstition. But all the same, there was the chance of others having an object in watching us, so every spadeful was thrown out in silence, every word spoken in a whisper. The night came on impenetrably black and obscure, but we worked on,

feeling our way lower and lower, taking turn and turn, till once more we stood in the pit we had dug, and commenced groping about with our hands, for the spades told us that we had come to whatever was buried.

"More of these yaller stones," said Tom.

We threw out as quietly as we could a couple of hundred rough lumps about the size of those fragments of granite used for macadamizing a modern road.

"Tom," I said, after trying about with my spade, "there's something more here. I believe those pieces were put in to deceive whoever searched."

"Let me clear out a little more of the sand, Mas'r Harry."

He threw out a few more spadefuls, filling the spade each time with his hands so as to throw out nothing more than sand; and then once more we began to feel about.

"What's that, Tom?" I whispered hastily.

I knew by his exclamation that he had found something particular.

"Nothin' at all," said Tom sulkily.

"I insist upon knowing what it is," I cried angrily, as I caught him by the arm.

For—it must have been the influence of the gold—I again felt suspicious.

"There it is, then," said Tom gruffly, "ketch hold."

I eagerly took that which he had handed to me, and then with a shudder of disgust hurled it away, as the gravedigger scene in "Hamlet" flashed across my mind; and then we worked on in silence.

"Bones," said Tom, "flint-knife things, and, hallo! what's that you've got, Mas'r Harry?" he exclaimed in a sharp whisper.

In my turn I had uttered an exclamation as my hands came in contact with a flat heavy piece of metal, which, upon being balanced upon a finger and tapped, gave forth a sonorous ring.

"I don't know, Tom," I whispered huskily, "but—but it feels like what we are in search of."

"Do you think it is gold, Mas'r Harry?" he hissed in a voice that told of his own excitement.

"Gold or silver, Tom," I said in a choking voice.

Then I felt faint. Suspicions of a horrible nature seemed to float across my brain. "Suppose," I thought, "Tom should murder me now to possess himself of the treasure, load the mules, and then bury me in the grave we had dug. The water would flow over it again in a few hours, and who would ever suspect the man who went away laden with wealth?"

The next moment, though, I had driven away the base thoughts, and was leaning against the rock above me.

"Tom," I said, "I'm faint; go and fetch the spirits."

"I will that, Mas'r Harry," he whispered, "for I don't know how it is, I'm feeling rather queer myself. It's this stuff, I think. I've got hold of one of these little tiles, and one can't see it, but it feels yaller."

Tom passed another plate into my hands, when running my fingers over it my heart beat more rapidly, for I could feel an embossed surface that told of cunning work, and I longed intensely to get a light and examine what we had found though I knew such a proceeding would be folly.

In a few minutes Tom was back, and a draught from the bottle we had brought revived us, so that we quickly cleared out the wet sand and water that kept filtering

in, and then as fast as we could grope drew out plate after plate and placed them in one of the coffee-bags Tom had brought.

We did not need telling that it was gold. The sonorous ring told that as plate touched plate. The darkness, as I said, was intense. But I could almost fancy that a bright yellow phosphorescent halo was spread around each plate as we drew it from its sandy bed.

"But suppose, Mas'r Harry, as it's only brass?" whispered Tom suddenly.

"Brass, Tom? No, it's gold—rich, yellow gold; and now who dares say I'm a beggar?"

"Not me, Mas'r Harry. But I won't believe it's gold till I've seen it by daylight. 'Tain't lead, or it wouldn't ring. 'Tain't iron, for it will cut. I've been trying it."

"Hush, Tom!" I said hoarsely. "Work—work! or it will be day, and we shall be discovered."

As I spoke I bent down into the hole to drag out what felt like a vase, but all beaten in and flattened. Then another, and four or five curiously shaped vessels.

"Fetch another bag, Tom," I whispered; for the one we now had felt heavy, and I wanted them to be portable.

"Wait a bit, Mas'r Harry," whispered Tom. "Here's a rum un here—big as a table top. Lend a hand, will you."

Both trembling with excitement we toiled and strained, and at last extricated a great flat circular plate that seemed to weigh forty or fifty pounds, and stood it against the rock.

And now in the wild thirst I forgot all about bags or concealment as we kept scraping out the sand and water,

and then brought out more plates, more cups, thin flat sheets, bars of the thickness of a finger and six inches long. Then another great round disc similar to the one I had dragged out with Tom; and then—then—sand—water—sand—water—sand—one solitary plate.

“There must be more, Tom!” I whispered excitedly. “Where is the rod?”

He felt about for a few minutes, and I heard the metal clinking upon metal as he drew the iron rod towards him. Then, feeling for the pointed end, he thrust it down here and there again and again.

“Try you, Mas'r Harry,” he said huskily.

I took the rod, and felt with it all over the pit; but everywhere it ran down easily into the sand, and I felt that we must have got all there was hidden there. And now, for the first time, I began to think of the value. Why, if this were all pure gold that lay piled up by our side, there must be thousands upon thousands of pounds' worth—twenty thousands at the least. But a pang shot through my brain the next instant, for the thought had struck me, suppose it should prove but copper after all.

The day would show it, and the day I hoped would soon be there. But now a new trouble assailed me. What about Tom—what share would he expect?

“Mas'r Harry” said Tom just then, “if this here all turns out to be gold you'll be a rich man, won't you?”

“Yes, Tom,” I said, “very wealthy.”

My words would hardly leave my lips

“Then you'll do the handsome thing by me when I get married, won't you, Mas'r Harry?”

“What shall I do, Tom?” I said, wondering the while what he would say.

"'Low me a pound a week and my 'bacco as long as I live."

"Yes, Tom, two if you like," I exclaimed aloud. "But now lend a hand here and let's get these behind the rock farther in."

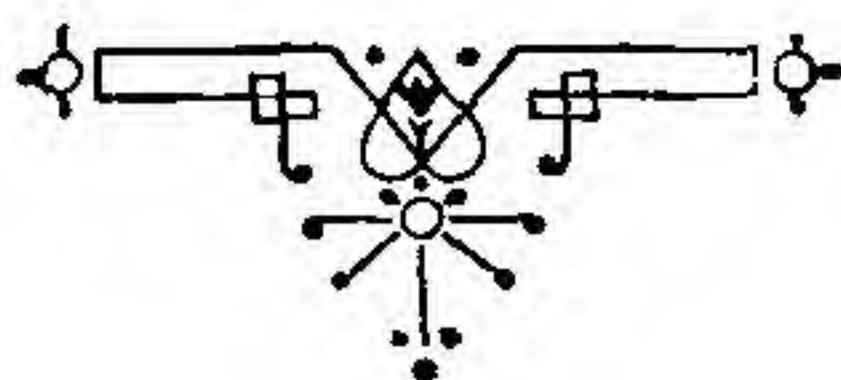
Fatigue! We never gave that a thought, as, each seizing one of the round shields, we carried them cautiously in and felt our way to where was the food, taking back with us more of the coffee-bags, in which we carefully packed the flattened cups, and each bore back a heavy bag, but only hastily to return again and again to collect the plates, and sheets, and bars we had rapidly thrown out; when we returned once more to throw ourselves upon the sand and feel over it with our hands again and again, creeping in every direction, forcing in our fingers and running the sand through them till we felt certain that nothing was left behind.

"Now, then, Tom," I said. "Quick!—the spades. There must not be a trace of this night's work left at daybreak."

"Tom's hard breathing was the only response, as, seizing his spade and giving me mine, he forced back the sand, helping me to shovel it in until the floor was once more pretty level, and we knew the water would do the rest, even to removing the traces of our running to and fro, unless the sharp Indian eye should be applied closely to the floor of the cavern.

We toiled on, working furiously in our excitement, feeling about so as to compensate as well as we could for the want of sight, till I knew that no more could be done, when, retreating inward to where we had dammed the stream, we let the water flow swiftly back into its old

channel, leaving the bits of rock where they were, save one or two whose loosening soon set the water free, so that it swept with a rush over the place where we had so lately toiled; and then, dripping with perspiration and water, we went and sat down to eat and rest just as the first faint streaks of dawn began to show in the valley, and we could see that there was a barrier across the mouth of the cave.





CHAPTER XXXV.

EXCITING TIMES.

LIGHT—more light, but still not enough to tell of what our treasure was composed. If we had been at the mouth of the cave it would have been possible, but where we were the darkness was still thick darkness.

Twice I had impatiently gazed at the metal I had been fingering with all a miser's avidity, when my attention was taken by an object upon a rock close by where we had worked during the night—a toil that I had been ready to declare a dream, time after time, but for the solid reality beneath my hands.

Tom caught sight of the object at the same moment as myself; and together, moved by the same impulse, we raced down, secured it, and then ran panting back with a gloriously-worked but battered *golden* cup, that we had placed upon the rock above us, and which had thus escaped our search.

The next minute we were gazing tremblingly back to see whether we had been observed, for to lose now the wondrous treasure in our grasp seemed unbearable.

But no—all was still; and, for my part, I could do nothing but pant with excitement as the truth dawned

more upon me with the coming day, that I was by this one stroke immensely rich. The treasure was gold—rich, ruddy gold, all save one of the great round shields, and that was of massive silver, black almost as ink with tarnish; while its fellow-shield—a sun, as I now saw, as I afterwards made out the other to be a representation of the moon—was of the richer metal.

I was right, then—Garcia could be set at defiance, my uncle freed. But it was all too good to be true; and that little IF thrust itself into my thoughts—that little IF that has so much to do with our lives.

If I could get the gold safely away!

My brow knit as I thought of this, and my hand closed involuntarily upon the gun; but directly after I felt that we must bestir ourselves to pack our treasure safely.

“Let us have something by way of breakfast, Tom,” I said hastily, after throwing my coat over the part of the treasure visible.

We ate as people eat whose thoughts are upon other things, till we were roused by a whinnying from the interior of the cave, when Tom hastily carried some maize to the mules so as to ensure their silence in case of the Indians again approaching the place.

As far as I could make out from the obscurity where I was there was not a trace of the sand having been disturbed—the water had removed it all; but I trembled as I thought of the consequences of some Indian eye having seen the golden vessel, for I knew that we should never have been allowed to return alive.

My plans now were to spend a portion of the day in carefully packing our treasure as compactly as possible, and then, when night had well fallen, loading the mules

and making the best of our way to the hacienda—easy practicable plans apparently; but Fate declared that I had not yet earned the wealth.

I said that Tom had gone to see about the mules, and for a few minutes I was hesitating about the nearest bag to me—one which, from the feel, contained a mixture of bars, plates, and cups, that I knew might be packed in a quarter the space.

I looked to the mouth of the cave; all was sunshine there; but it was dark where I stood, and feeling that if the task of packing was to be done, the sooner it was set about the better, I seized the bag, drew out a large and massive vessel, two or three plates that must have formed a part of the covering of some barbaric altar, and was about to draw forth more, when I heard a faint noise, and, turning, Tom sprang upon me with a fierce look in his countenance, bore me down amongst the treasure, and laid his hand upon my mouth. His whole weight was upon me, and he had me in such a position that all struggling seemed vain; but with the thought strong upon me that the temptation of the gold had been too much for him, and that as some victim had evidently been sacrificed at its burial I was to fall at its disinterring, I bowed myself up, and the next moment should have endeavoured to throw him off, had not his lips been applied to my ear and a few words been whispered which sent the blood flowing, frightened, back to my heart, as the full extent of their meaning came home.

“Mas'r Harry, don't move: you're watched!”

It was no time for speaking, and I was in such a position that I could not see, while for quite a quarter of an hour we lay there motionless, when, gliding aside, Tom

made room for me to rise, pointing the while towards the mouth of the cave, through which I could see, some distance down the ravine, a couple of Indians curiously peering about, and more than once stooping cautiously over the little stream which there ran, half-hidden by rocks and undergrowth.

"They're looking to see if the water's muddy, Mas'r Harry," whispered Tom. And then, directly after, "Creep back a little more behind the rock here; they're coming this way again."

What! step back and leave the treasure? No, I felt that I could not do that, but that I would sooner fight for it to the last gasp.

Tom was right, though. The Indians were coming nearer, disappearing at length behind the rocks at the mouth as they came cautiously on; and I lay down flat upon my face to watch for their appearance above the barrier when they began to climb it, Tom retiring the while farther into the cavern.

Two men, not such odds as need give us fear if we were compelled to fight; for after the pains to attain the treasure, it seemed impossible to resign it. My conscience would not teach me any wrong-doing in its appropriation.

Ten minutes elapsed, and the Indians did not appear; but it was plain enough that they knew of the treasure's existence, and watched over its safety. But had they seen us come?

I thought not, as at last they came slowly up, looking from side to side, as if in search of intruders; and my heart beat with a heavy excited throb as I thought of the discovery, and the inevitable struggle to follow. Who

would be slain I wondered. Should I escape? And then I shuddered as I pictured the bloodshed that might ensue.

And all this time nearer came the Indians, until they stood amongst the blocks of stone, peering eagerly in, and shading their eyes to pierce the darkness.

For a few minutes it seemed to me that they must see that the soil had been disturbed, or else make out my crouching form; but it soon became evident that they saw nothing—that the cavern presented no unusual aspect. As far, too, as I could make out, there was an evident unwillingness to enter, as if the place possessed some sanctity or dread which kept them from passing its portals.

They seemed to be content with watching and listening; but would they keep to that?

I thought not; for suddenly my breath came thickly, as I saw one of the men make a sign or two to his companion, and then begin cautiously to descend into the cavern; when, nerving myself for the struggle, I stretched out my hand for my knife and pistols, determined to fight to the death for that which I had won.

Cautiously, and in a peculiarly shrinking fashion, the Indian climbed down, while his companion leaned anxiously forward. Then followed moments of suspense that seemed hours, as the man who now stood beneath the arch stretched forth both hands, as if invoking some power, uttered a few words, and then stopped short, for his companion gave a loud peculiar cry, and I saw that he was anxiously gazing down the ravine, when the first Indian hurriedly joined him, and, together, they glided silently away.

"That was a close shave, Mas'r Harry," said Tom, creeping softly forward, gun in hand. "That poor chap didn't know what a risk he run of being dead and buried. I had him covered with my gun the whole time; and if he'd made at you with his knife, down he must have gone."

"I want the gold, Tom," I said hoarsely, "but no bloodshed."

"More don't I, Mas'r Harry," he replied; "so all they've got to do is to leave us alone, and alone we'll leave them. Now, what's to be done next?"

That was plain enough, and needed no answering. The treasure had to be carefully packed; and together we worked hard, fitting the plates, bars, and tile-shaped pieces together in the bags, so that they should occupy as little space as possible, binding together and covering the two great discs, and then packing the vases and cups, the most awkward part of our discovery; but at last we had all in the ample supply of coffee bags Tom had brought, and bound round and round with the cotton ropes which we unravelled for the purpose.

I breathed more freely as one by one we carried our heavy, awkward-looking packages into the part of the cave where the mules were, and then laid them behind a rock in the dark vault, ready for the night's journey.

"And now," said Tom, "we'd better take it in turns to have a good sleep, the other keeping watch—for we shall be up all night again."

I turned round to Tom, to stare with astonishment at the man who could talk so coolly about sleep with such a treasure beneath his charge. As for me, my veins throbbed with the fever that coursed through them, and

I could not have closed my eyes for an instant till I had my treasure in safety.

"Will you take first turn, Mas'r Harry?" said Tom, yawning.

"No," I said peevishly; "you can sleep if you wish to."

"Well, Mas'r Harry, I do wish to," said Tom; "and that ain't nowise wonderful, when I was hard at work all lars night."

Tom made no more ado, but stretched himself out in the sandiest spot he could find; and the next minute there could not be a doubt as to the state he was in, for he snored loudly.

Judging from appearances, when I once more walked, gun in hand, towards the mouth of the cave, it was about four o'clock, so that there were at least five or six hours to pass before we could attempt our homeward journey.

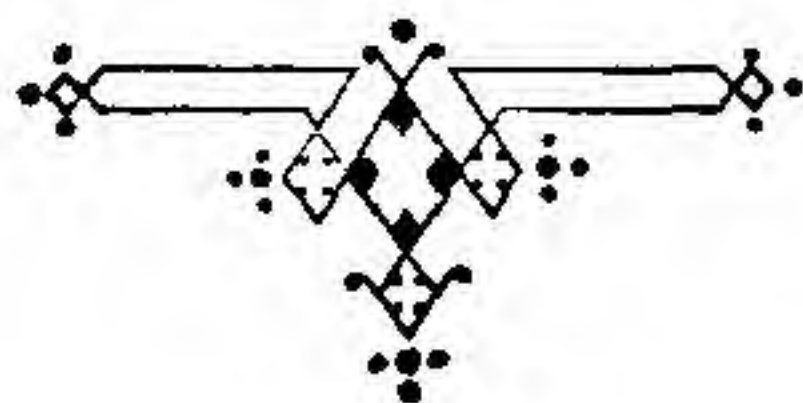
I did not dare to go far towards the mouth, lest there should be watchers there; but picking out the best spot for observation, I stood and gazed eagerly around, scanning every crag, tree, and bush within range, in the search I made for enemies.

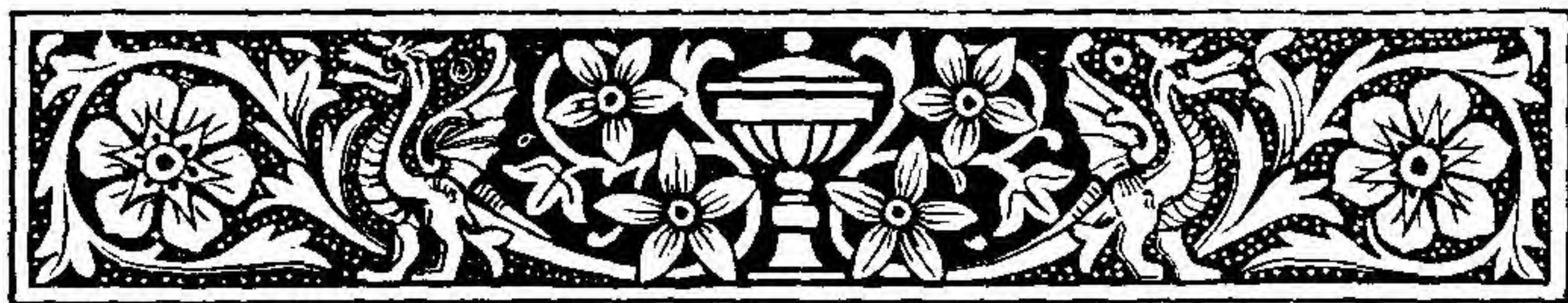
If I could only get the treasure safely to the hacienda, we could melt it down there, and turn it into ingots handy for packing; when, with the offer of ample for the purchase of a good farm, I could, perhaps, persuade my uncle to return to England, or, if he preferred, he might stay here.

Then I thought again whether it would be wisdom to attempt to carry off the treasure by night, we two alone to guard it. I stood, hesitating, thinking of how easy it would be for the Indians to take us at a disadvantage; of what an insecure place the plantation would be should

they discover that the treasure was gone; and at last I made up my mind as to my course, and walked sharply back to where Tom was snoring.

Then, stooping down, I unfastened the package which contained the little bars, took out fifty, and secured the package again; when I shook and roused up Tom.





CHAPTER XXXVI.

ANOTHER ENCOUNTER.

“**R**IGHT, Mas'r Harry, I'm here,” he exclaimed.

“Put half those about you in your different pockets, Tom,” I said. And he did as he was bid, handling the little ingots as if they were so much lead. “And, Tom, I want your advice. I've come to the conclusion that it is not prudent to take all this through the woods at night, with Indians about.”

“That's sense, that is,” said Tom, interrupting.

“I think, Tom, we'll hide it—all but this, which we'll take back; and then we can come well prepared some other time, to carry the rest away.”

“Good, Mas'r Harry; but where'll we hide it?”

“That's what I'm thinking, Tom,” I said. “Where do you think would be a good place?”

“Well, Mas'r Harry, I shouldn't bury it, because that's the way it was hidden afore; nor I wouldn't chuck it down the big gulf place, as you call it; it would be safe enough, only we couldn't get it again.”

“Don't fool, Tom,” I said impatiently.

“Who's a fooling?” said Tom gruffly. “Tell you what, Mas'r Harry, I don't think those Indian chaps would ever

have the pluck to go right in where we've been. What do you think of the way under the arch on the raft?

"The very idea that struck me, Tom," I said.

Then I told him my plans—the result being that, at the end of a couple of hours, the little raft was prepared, launched, laden with our packages, and once more, with candles stuck in their clay sticks, we were poling ourselves along very slowly in the black tunnel.

The lights flashed on roof, and from off the water, which rippled over the bamboos and soaked us through and through; but we pressed slowly and steadily on till we must have been half-way to the vault of the troubled waters, when I whispered to Tom to stop.

We were now in a part where the tunnel widened out to thirty or forty feet, though the roof was not more than a foot above our heads, and remarkable for the streaks of a creamy spar which banded it in every direction.

"Tom," I said in a whisper, as I glanced round to see that we were alone, "could we do better than this?"

As I spoke I was trying the depth with my bamboo pole, to find that, wherever I reached, there was not more than five feet of water.

"But suppose it's that shivering sand, and it swallows it up, Mas'r Harry?"

"But it's hard rock, Tom. Feel," I whispered.

There was no mistaking the firmness of the bottom; so, carefully marking the spot by a cross which I scored on the roof with my knife, we softly dropped in six golden packages over the side of our little raft, which seemed ready to leap out of the water on being released from its heavy burden.

A soft gentle splash in each case, and then the black

waters closed over each package, a pang striking my heart as they disappeared; and I asked myself whether I was wise, now that I had gained the object of my search, to let it go from me again like that. I was roused, though, from my reverie by Tom, who generally had a word of encouragement for me at the blackest times.

“There, Mas’r Harry, that’s covered up well, and it can be easily uncovered again; and I’ll lay my head agin a halfpenny apple, that if we don’t come to fetch that there, nobody else won’t; for unless we told, nobody wouldn’t never find it.”

I could not help thinking that Tom was right; and now, with my treasure found, and, as it were, banked for my use, I felt lighter of spirit, and we floated easily back in about the quarter of the time occupied in going; when, carefully taking our raft once more partly to pieces, we concealed it behind the rocks, and made the best of our way to the mules.

“Now, Mas’r Harry, you may do as you like; but I say, let’s get twenty or thirty of these stone icicles, just as if we’d come on purpose to fetch ’em, pack ’em atop of the mules, and ride bang out as if we were not afraid of anybody.”

It was good counsel, and I followed it, riding over the stony barrier just as the sun was setting. The stalactites were swung in coffee-bags on either side of the mules, which, delighted at being once more in the open air, cantered off merrily whenever the track would allow.

It was just beginning to grow dark upon as glorious an evening as ever shone upon the gorgeous tropic world, when we reached the end of the ravine, and both became at the same instant aware of about a dozen Indians, who

advanced quickly, making friendly signs, and repeating the word—"Amigos! Amigos!"

"They want to see what we've got, Mas'r Harry," chuckled Tom. "Don't show fight unless they do."

Professing to ask for tobacco and a light, the little party surrounded us; and, as if by accident, one man touched the bags, and contrived to see their contents, when he said something to his companions, to whom we civilly gave what they asked, showing no trace of tremor; while they were smiling and servile. But I could not help feeling what would have been our fate had the lading of those mules been the treasure, for twelve to two were long odds.

It was evident that they were satisfied, and giving us the country salutation, they bade us good-night, and we moved off; but Tom pulled up, and shouted after the leader of the party, who returned; when, with a face whose gravity could be seen, even in that dim short twilight, to be extreme, Tom took out one of his smallest stalactites, held it up before him, and repeated the word "buono" three times, and then presented it to the Indian, who received it with grave courtesy and retired.

"There," said Tom, "if he don't go and tell his tribe that we're madmen after that, why, I was never born down Cornwall way. Say, though, Mas'r Harry, that was a narrow escape; those chaps watch that gold, and they thought we had it; and if we had been loaded that way I'm thinking that it would have been buried again, with two skulls and bones this time, and those would have been ours."

I shuddered as I urged my mule onward, anxious to reach the hacienda, which we did earlier than I hoped

for, stabled our mules, and then, relieving Tom of his golden burden, I went up to my room and secured it in my travelling case, before descending to find my uncle sitting, with Lilla kneeling beside him, holding his hand; and a glance showed me that both she and Mrs. Landell had been weeping bitterly.

I was surprised to see them assembled at so late an hour, but taking no notice, I went up and shook hands.

"Well, Harry," said my uncle sadly; "had enough of exploring yet?"

"Quite, Uncle," I said. "I have finished now."

He looked up at me for a moment, and then fell to stroking Lilla's golden hair.

"Well, lad, I'm sorry," he said, after a pause; "but I may as well tell you, and be out of my misery. But don't think I blame you, lad—don't think I blame you, for I suppose it was to be."

"What is it, Uncle?" I said in an indifferent tone. "No new trouble, I hope?"

He glanced at me in a sadly disappointed way, and then said sternly:

"I don't reproach you, Harry; but that blow you struck Garcia has been my ruin, unless I buy his favour with this."

As he spoke he laid his hand tenderly upon Lilla's head, then drew her to him and kissed her lovingly.

"But we can't do that, my little lamb—we can't do that," he continued. "We are to be turned out of the place; but I daresay there's a living to be got—eh, Harry? You'll not leave us, I suppose, now we're in trouble? You said you would not, and now, my lad, is

the time to put you to the proof. You'll work now, won't you?"

"Not if I know it, Uncle," I said coolly. "Why should I work? I'm much obliged for your hospitality; but I feel now disposed to go back to England, and the sooner the better."

My uncle did not speak, and a dead silence fell upon all. I caught one sad, reproachful glance from Lilla's eyes; and then she clung, weeping and whispering to my uncle, who, however, only shook his head.

"I think, my dears, we'll go to rest," he said at last suddenly. "Lilla, my child, fetch the Book—we'll have one chapter in the old place for the last time, for who can tell where we shall be to-morrow?"

My heart burned within me as I longed to tell the true-hearted old fellow of my success, but I would not then. The news of Garcia's behaviour gave me an opportunity that I could not resist, and, after sitting in silence till my uncle had read his chapter and offered up a simple prayer for the protection of all, I allowed them to part from me almost coldly, though more in sorrow than in anger, and to go, aching of heart, to bed.

I knew that Tom would not say a word, so I was safe; and the next morning, after a sad, dull breakfast, I sat with them all in the darkened room, my uncle starting at every noise in the yard, where all looked bright and fair, while Lilla's eyes met mine from time to time in mingled reproach and wonder at what seemed to her my heartless behaviour.

We had not long to wait, for it seemed that Garcia had declared his intention of being there that morning to demand payment of money, the greater part of which

had been advanced to Mrs. Landell when a widow—a debt which my uncle had undertaken to repay at the same time that he had accepted further favours from this man.

We had not been seated there an hour when we heard Garcia's voice in the yard, and Lilla crept closer to Mrs. Landell.

"Harry," said my uncle, "you must please leave the room. I was in hopes that you would have gone out. I cannot find it in my heart to give up without making an appeal to Garcia for time."

"An appeal that shall end in a new bargain being made with respect to that poor girl!" I exclaimed. "Uncle, be a man, or you will make me blush for you!"

My uncle was about to speak when Garcia nosily entered the room, his sneering, triumphant face turning pale with rage as he saw me seated there.

Mrs. Landell and Lilla both cast an imploring glance at me, one which I answered by crossing over, taking Lilla's hand, and whispering a few words of comfort and encouragement.

Garcia's eyes flashed, but he kept down his resentment, and, advancing to the table:

"Senor Landell," he said, "I come to demand the money that is due to me, and which I must now have. Of course you are prepared?"

"Prepared, Garcia?" said my uncle. "I am not prepared—you know that," he continued sadly. "But still these stringent proceedings will do you no good. I ask you as a favour for time. I am certain that I can realize more from the plantation than you can. Give me time and it will prove to your advantage."

"Miss Lilla," said Garcia, advancing with a smile, "you hear your stepfather's words. It rests with you. Shall I give him time?"

Lilla's only reply, as I stood back, was a shudder, and she clung more closely to her mother.

The action was not lost upon Garcia, who stepped back rapidly to the door, uttered some words to a couple of men in waiting, and they followed him into the room.

"You have the papers," said Garcia fiercely to the elder man, who seemed a sort of notary; "take possession of this place and all thereon, as forfeited to me in accordance with the bonds. Senor Landell, in an hour I require you to be off this plantation. As for you," he exclaimed, turning to advance threateningly upon me, "you are an intruder. This place is my property; leave here this instant! Or stay," he said with mock courtesy; "perhaps the gay young English senor will take compassion upon his uncle's position and release him by paying his debt. What does Senor Grant say?"

"Harry, for Heaven's sake," cried my uncle, "let there be no disturbance. Take care, or there will be bloodshed!" he cried.

For as I advanced to confront Garcia he drew out a pistol.

"Stand aside, Uncle!" I exclaimed angrily, for he had caught my arm. "I know how to deal with this cowardly bully! Put up that pistol or——"

I did not finish my sentence, for in obedience to a nod Garcia was dragged back into a chair, and Tom Bulk's sturdy arms pinioned him, but not in time; for, with a cry of rage, he drew the trigger. There was a sharp report, and then, as the smoke floated upward, a wild cry echoed through the room.



CHAPTER XXXVII.

SLIPPERY METAL.

THAT cry was from Lilla, who ran to my uncle's side just as he staggered to a chair, holding his face with both hands.

"Not much hurt, I think," he gasped; "but it was a close touch—a sort of farewell keepsake," he said with a faint attempt to smile.

It was, indeed, a narrow escape, for the ball had ploughed one of his cheeks so that it bled profusely, and I could have freely returned the shot in the rage which I felt.

Perhaps it would have been better for all parties had I fired, for it would only have been disabling as black-hearted a scoundrel as ever breathed. But my plans were made, and by an effort I kept to them, just as the notary was about to flee in alarm.

"Loose him, Tom," I said; and Garcia started up, foaming almost at the mouth. "Keep back there," I cried, "and do not let me see one of those hands move towards breast or pocket. The instant I detect any such act I fire."

Garcia stood scowling for a few moments but not meeting my eye, and I continued addressing the notary:

"Give me full particulars of this amount, and I will pay it."

"You, Harry—you!" exclaimed my uncle.

"You!—you vile impostor! You beggar and vagabond! You do not possess an onza of gold," roared Garcia, bursting forth into a fit of vituperation. "Don't listen to him; don't heed him; it's a trick—a plan. I take possession. The money was to be paid this morning, and it is not paid, so I seize the plantation."

"You are the business man," I said coolly to the notary—with that coolness that the possession of money gives—"this is a mining country, and gold in ounces should be current."

"The best of currency, senor," said the notary with a smile and a bow.

"Tell me the amount, then, in ounces," I said, "and I will pay you."

"Don Xeres," gasped Garcia, almost beside himself with rage, "I will take no promises to pay."

The old notary shrugged his shoulders.

"But, Senor Garcia, there are no promises to pay. I understand the English senor to say that he will pay—at once! Am I not right, senor?"

"Quite," I said. "Uncle, I will lend you this amount."

"But, Harry, my dear boy, you are mad! You have no idea of the extent."

"Two hundred and five ounces would equal the amount in *pesos d'oro* which Senor Landell is indebted," said the notary quietly.

"Good!" I said. "Then will you have proper balances brought? Uncle, see to the return of your papers."

"I am in the hands of Senor Xeres," said my uncle in a bewildered tone. "He will see justice done."

The old notary bowed and smiled, while I crossed to where my leather case stood upon a side-table, brought it to my chair, and then seated myself, slowly unbuckling the straps and unlocking it while the balances were brought, when I drew out six of the little yellow bar ingots and passed them over to the notary, who was the banker of the district as well.

He took them, turned them over, wiped his glasses, and replaced them; then examined each bar again.

"Pure metal, I think, senor?" I said, smiling.

"The purest, Senor Inglese," he replied with another bow.

Then, placing the ingots in the balances, he recorded each one's weight as he went on, to find them, with a few grains variation more or less, six ounces each.

Five times, to Garcia's astonishment and rage, did I bring from the case in my lap six of the golden bars, the notary the while testing and weighing them one by one in the coolest and most business-like way imaginable. Then his spectacles were directed inquiringly at me, and I brought out four more, which were duly weighed and placed with the others. Then again were the spectacles directed at me.

"Another ounce, less a quarter, senor," said the notary. "I have here two hundred and four ounces and a quarter."

"Fortunatus's purse wants aiding, Uncle," I said, unwilling to exhibit more of the golden spoil. "You can manage the three-quarters of an ounce?"

My uncle was speechless; but he rushed to a secretary, took out a little canvas bag, and counted out the

difference in coin. When, coolly drawing out bags of his own, the notary made up a neat package of the bars, inclosing therewith his account of the weights, tied it up, lit — with apparatus of his own — a wax taper, sealed the package, and handed it to Garcia, who took it with a fierce scowl, but only to dash it down the next instant upon the table.

“I will not take it,” he exclaimed. “It is a trick—the gold is base!”

“Senor Don Pablo Garcia, I have—I, S. Xeres—have examined and proved that gold,” said the old notary. “I say it is pure, and you cannot refuse it. Senor Landell, there are your bonds now. Senor Garcia is angry, but the business is terminated.”

Rising and bowing to us with a courtly grace that could win nothing less than respect, the old notary handed some deeds to my uncle, and then, picking up the gold, he passed his arm through Garcia’s and led him away—the notary’s attendant following with his master’s writing-case and balances.

But the next moment a shadow darkened the door, and Garcia would have rushed in had not Tom blocked the way.

“Now, then, where are you shovin’ to, eh?” grumbled Tom; and there was a scuffle, and the muttering of a score of Spanish oaths, with, I must say, a couple of English ones, that sounded to be in Tom’s voice, when Garcia shouted, in a voice that we could all hear:

“Tell him there is another debt to pay yet, and it shall be paid in another coin!”

The door closed then, and it was evident that Tom was enjoying the act of seeing Garcia off the premises, while

the next minute my uncle was holding me tightly by both hands and my aunt sobbing on my neck.

"And I was saying you were like the rest of the world—like the rest of the world, Harry, my dear boy," was all my uncle could say, in a choking voice, and there were tears in his eyes as he spoke.

"Say no more, Uncle—say no more," I exclaimed, shaking him warmly by the hands.

Then he took his wife to his heart, telling her in broken words that there was to be peace at the old place after all.

It must have been from joy at the happiness I was the means of bringing into that home, or else from the example that was set me, for the next moment I had Lilla in my arms, kissing her for response to the thanks looking from her bright eyes; and even when my uncle turned to me I could only get one hand at liberty to give him, the other would still clasp the little form that did not for an instant shrink.

"Too bad—too bad, Harry—too bad!" said my uncle, with a smile and a shake of the head. "I am no sooner free of one obligation than I am under another; and so now, on the strength of that money, you put in your claims."

"To be sure, Uncle," I said laughing; "and you see how poor Lilla suffers."

I repented saying those words the next moment, for Lilla shrank hastily away, blushing deeply.

My uncle and I were soon left alone, when, holding out his hand to me, he said, in a voice whose deep tones told how he was moved:

"Harry, my boy, I can never repay you the service

you have done me; but if I live I will repay you the money."

"Look here, Uncle," I said, "once and for all—let that be buried. There, light your cigar; and I can talk to you." Then, taking our places in a recess by one of the shaded windows, I spoke to him in a low tone. "You know how I have spent my time lately?"

He nodded.

"Treasure-seeking?"

He nodded again.

"Uncle, at times it almost seemed to me a madness; but I persevered and succeeded. Look here!"

I tore open the case and showed him the sixteen golden ingots remaining.

"And you found all that, Harry! My boy, you were fortunate indeed."

"All that, Uncle!" I said with a smile. "That is not a hundredth part. I am rich. I? No! We are rich; and now I want your advice. What are we to do? for I've hidden my treasure again till I can fetch it away in safety."

"You have done well, then," he said gravely. "But is not this some delusion, my boy?"

"Are these delusive, Uncle?" I exclaimed, clinking together two of the sonorous little bars. "Were those delusive which Garcia has carried off? No, Uncle, I thought once it must be a dream; but it is a solid reality. I have found the treasures of one of the temples of the Sun—ingots, plates, sheets, cups, and two great shields besides, all of solid metal."

"Harry," said my uncle, "it sounds like a wild invention from some story-teller's pen, and I should laugh in

your face but for the proofs you have given me. But you must not stay here in this country. It is as much yours as any lucky adventurer's, but your right would be disputed in a hundred quarters; while, as for the Indians—"

"Disputed, Uncle?" I said interrupting him. "Disputed if it were known. You know it."

"Does any one else?" said my uncle anxiously.

"Tom was with me. We found it together," I said, "and he helped me to conceal it again. But I could trust him with my life. In fact, Uncle," I said laughing, "we owe one another half-a-dozen lives over our discovery, for either I was saving his life or he was saving mine all the time."

"But the Indians, Harry—the Indians! That is a sacred treasure—the treasure devoted to their gods, hence its remaining so long untouched. If they knew that you had taken it, no part of South America would hold you free from their vengeance. They would have your life, sooner or later."

"Pleasant place this, certainly, Uncle," I said laughing; "what with Garcia and the Indians."

"I don't think it could become known from those ingots," said my uncle musingly, "though Garcia will rack his brains to find out how you became possessed of them. And yet I don't know; you see they have two or three characters stamped on them that the Indians might know. But were you seen?"

"Coming from the place, Uncle? Yes, I suppose I must have been watched constantly. But all the same, I have the treasure hidden away; and as to the risk from the Indians, I don't feel much alarmed; and you may

depend upon it that they are in the most profound—What's that?"

My uncle uttered an ejaculation at the same moment, for as I spoke, rapid as the dart of a serpent, a dark shadowy arm was passed under the blind close to the little table where we sat, and on looking there were but fifteen of the little ingots left.

"Stop here! I'll go," I exclaimed.

In an instant I had torn aside the blind, pushed open the jalousie, and leaped out into the outer sunshine, to stand in the glare, looking this way and that way, but in vain: there were flowers, and trees, and the bright glare, but not a soul in sight.

I stood for an instant to think; and then, feeling for my pistol to see if it was there if wanted, I dashed across the plantation towards the forest, peering in every direction, but without avail; and at last, more troubled than I cared to own, I returned, dripping with perspiration, to the hacienda, to meet Tom.

"Say, Mas'r Harry, what's the good o' running yourself all away, like so much butter? 'Tain't good for the constitution."

"Have you seen any Indians lurking about to-day, Tom, anywhere near the place?"

"Not half a one, Mas'r Harry, because why? I've been fast asleep ever since I saw the Don off the premises."

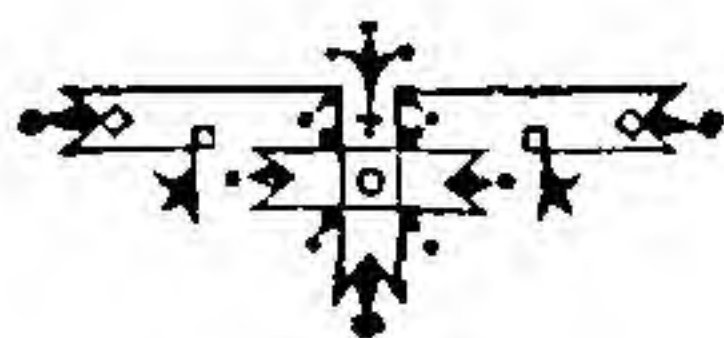
"Keep a good look-out, Tom," I cried.

Then I hurried in to my uncle, who looked troubled.

"I don't like that, Harry," he said. "There were eavesdroppers close at hand. I thought I would go too, but I saw nothing. Not a man had been out of the yard. But there, take the gold up to your room and lock it in

the big chest; the key is in it. I put it here for safety till you got back, and—confound!”

We gazed in blank astonishment, for as my uncle opened his secretary and laid bare my leather case, which he had locked and strapped up, there it was with the straps cut through, the lock cut out, and the fifteen ingots gone!





CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BARS WITHOUT BOLTS.

AS soon as my uncle had recovered from his astonishment he took out and loaded a couple of brace of pistols, laying one pair ready to hand and placing the others in his pockets.

“Harry, my lad,” he then said seriously, “we have entered upon something that will take all our wits to compass. We have cunning people to deal with; but Englishmen have brains of their own, and perhaps we can circumvent those who are against us. I wonder whether Garcia will get safe home with his share.”

I was too much put out to think or care much about Garcia just then. Certainly I did think it a good thing that he had been paid off, and the principal current of my thoughts just then tended to a congratulatory point as I thought of how much more serious the loss might have been. That I had done right in concealing the treasure was evident; and there it must lie, I thought, until I could bear it at once away out of the country.

My musings were interrupted by my uncle.

“Harry,” he said, “I’d give something if the women were away from here. I hope I am magnifying the trouble; but I fear that we are going to be between two

fires; and, at present I hardly know what course to pursue. I'm afraid of your gold, my lad, but a prince's fortune must not be slighted; and my conscience does not much upbraid me with respect to helping you to secure it. But we must not pass over this robbery in silence. That was done by no one here, I am sure. We must try and put an end to eavesdropping so close at hand, or more strange things may happen. Now, take my advice: both you and Tom go well armed, don't stir many yards from the plantation; and now come with me and let us carefully search the place inside and out. Nearly a hundred ounces of gold taken within the last few minutes, and part even from under our eyes. It won't do, Harry—it won't do!”

Tom was called in, armed, and then the place was thoroughly searched inside and out, but without avail; not a trace could be seen, till, after a few minutes' thought, my uncle made a sign to me, placed Tom in one position, me in another, and then disappeared into the house.

Five minutes after there was a loud cry, the sharp crack of a pistol, and what seemed like some beast of prey leaped from one of the upper windows full twelve feet to the ground, about half-way between Tom and myself.

With a rush we made for the falling object, grasping it as it fell to the earth; but the next instant I was sent staggering back, as the Indian—for such it was—bounded up, striking me in the chest with his hand; while, when I gathered myself together again, Tom was standing alone, and my uncle came running out holding a handkerchief to his face, which had recommenced bleeding.

"Did you stop him?" he said.

"Stop!" cried Tom. "It was like trying to stop a thing made of quicksilver. But," he continued with a grin, "I've got his skin; he left that in my hands, and I say, Mas'r Harry, if he wasn't made of quicksilver he was of gold."

For at that moment, as Tom shook the dark native cloth garment left in his hands by the fleeing Indian, the sixteen ingots fell to the ground, to be instantly secured.

"Harry," said my uncle, "I told you we had to deal with a cunning enemy. That fellow was in the space between the ceiling and roof of my bed-room. How he got there I can't tell; but," he added with a shudder, "I fear if he had not been dislodged some of us would not have seen the morning's light."

"But pursuit, Uncle," I cried. "Let us try and overtake him."

"No—no," he said uneasily. "We should only be led into a trap in the forest, and we are too weak for that. I'm afraid, Harry, that this affair is going to assume dimensions greater than we think for. It is evident that the Indians suspected you of having been at their sacred treasure, and despatched a spy to watch if their suspicions were correct. I tried to bring him down, but I had only a momentary glance and I must have missed him. No, Harry, there must be no pursuit but plenty of scheming for defence, if we wish to hold that which we have got. As I said before, there is no knowing where this will end. Which way did he go?"

"Right away towards the forest, sir," said Tom.

"Perhaps only to slip back and watch by some other

path," muttered my uncle. "Give me the bars, Harry, and I'll take them in, while you and Tom walk cautiously round before coming to me. Go one each way, right round, so as to meet again here, and then come in and we will talk matters over a little. But stay—tell me—did you see anything of the Indians, do you say, as you came back?"

I repeated the incident of being surrounded, and the way in which Tom presented a stalactite to the principal man.

My uncle smiled grimly.

"Tom," he said, "you must look out, or that stalactite will come back with interest. I'm afraid that we English do not give the Indians credit for all the brain they possess. They may have once been a simple, childlike race, but long oppression has roused something more in their breasts. You must look out, lads—look out."

My uncle left us, and Tom started one way, I the other, to look watchfully and carefully round for danger; although, to my way of thinking, it was decidedly a work of supererogation there in broad daylight, with the sun pouring down his intensely bright beams. There was the creeper-overhung verandah on one side, which, at a glance, I could see was untenanted; there, on the other side, was the garden-like plantation, with its gorgeous blossoms and flitting birds. The rows could be easily scanned, and I looked down between them; but it was evident that there was no danger to apprehend nearer than the forest; and I reached one corner of the verandah just as a parrot gave one of its peculiar calls, to be answered by another behind me.

This was followed by a regular chorus from the woods,

every parrot within hearing setting up a series of its ear-piercing shrieks, which in turn started birds of other kinds; the toucans hopping about from branch to branch uttering their singular barking cries, as they raised high their huge bills, which looked as if they would overbalance their bodies, but were as light as if made of paper and as thin.

It did not seem a time to notice such things, but somehow they impressed themselves upon my mind, and I could not help letting my eyes rest upon a pair of the most magnificent trogons I had ever seen. They were in the full beauty of their gorgeous golden-green plumage, which contrasted strongly with their brilliant scarlet breasts. Where they were perched there was an opening among the trees and the full blaze of the sun came down upon their backs, crests, and yard-long tail-feathers which glistened and sparkled at every movement as if formed of burnished metal.

This set me thinking of the golden treasure, and a sort of childish fancy came upon me as to whether these birds might be inhabited by the spirits of some of the old gold-loving Incas, who were watching over their treasure and waiting about to see what steps I should take next to steal that store away.

I walked on, met, and passed Tom, who remarked upon the improbability of the copperskin showing up again; and then I continued my patrol slowly round the house, past the court-yard, where all was still, and at last found Tom where we had parted from my uncle.

"Seen anything, Tom?" I said.

"Lizard cutting up the verandy, Mas'r Harry, and a bee-bird buzzing about over the flowers: nothing else."

I led the way into the room, and Tom followed, to stand at the door, picking his cap, and waiting to be told to come in.

"Don't stand there, Tom," I said; "come in and sit down. You are to be one of the privy-councillors."

"All right, Mas'r Harry," said Tom, seating himself close to the door.

My uncle not being in the room, I supposed that he had gone to secure the gold, and walked across to where lay my cut and destroyed leather valise, which I was turning over when I heard what had never thrilled through the rooms of my uncle's house since I had been there—namely, a light, heart-stirring, silvery-like song, and for a few moments I stood listening, as it came nearer and nearer, till Lilla tripped into the dark room, to start, stop short, and then colour up upon finding the place occupied.

The next moment I was by her side restraining her, for she would have darted away, and as I looked in her eyes I could read the story of the happy little heart rejoicing at being freed from a hateful bondage.

I must give Tom the credit of being a most discreet companion, for he suddenly found that it would be possible to repair my valise, and for the next quarter of an hour he was busily cutting and unpicking the great coarse stitches.

I was startled from my dreams back to the realities of life, for during that quarter of an hour existence had been bright and golden enough for me, without thinking of anything else; and the gold, the Indians, my uncle—everything had been forgotten, when Mrs. Landell entered the room.

"Have you seen your uncle?" she said to me, rather anxiously.

"Not during the last quarter of an hour or so," I replied. "He left us to come indoors. Go and see if he is in the yard," I said to Tom.

Tom went, to return in about five minutes with the news that my uncle had not been there for some time.

"Are you sure he came in?" said my aunt.

"Well, no—not sure," I replied; "he left us to come in. But, by the way, Aunt, where would my uncle put plate or money that he wanted to keep in safety?"

"Oh, in the strong chest in his little office here," said my aunt, leading the way to a small cupboard of a room just large enough for his desk, a stool, and an old sea-chest in which he kept his books, and, it seemed, such money as he had not in use.

But my uncle had evidently not been there, for the door was closed, and, after a moment's thought, Mrs. Landell remembered that her husband had not asked her for the key, which was in her pocket.

We waited ten minutes, after which both Tom and I went out to make fresh inquiries, but without avail; then, pausing in the doorway, Tom said to me in a low tone:

"Mas'r Harry, you always laughed at me, and said I was making bugbears; but we've been watched and dodged ten times as much as you think for."

"Perhaps so, Tom," I said moodily.

"And I don't want to make no more bugbears now," continued Tom; "but I'm sure as if some one told me, or as if I saw it all myself, that your uncle has been dropped on, and they've got him and the gold too this time, Mas'r Harry."

"Absurd, Tom! Why, he had not half-a-dozen yards to go."

"Then they was half-a-dozen yards too many," said Tom sullenly. "We didn't ought to have left him, Mas'r Harry."

"But you don't for a moment think—"

"No, Mas'r Harry, I don't; but I feel quite sure as they've burked him, and got him away with them bars of gold. You see if they haven't now!"

It seemed so improbable that I was disposed to laugh; but I felt the next instant that it could be no laughing matter, and with a feeling of anxiety at my heart that would not be driven away, I turned to enter the house just as there was a noise and confusion in the yard, and, to my surprise, old Senor Xeres, the notary and banker, was assisted into the hacienda, closely followed by his attendant, both bleeding freely.

Tom looked meaningly at me, and the next minute we were helping to bear the old Spaniard to a couch, when, his wounds being roughly bound up, and a stimulant given, he told us in tolerable English that about three miles from the hacienda, while on his way to the nearest town, he had been set upon suddenly, and in spite of the resistance offered by himself and servant, they had been roughly treated, and the gold intrusted to him by Pablo Garcia had been taken away.

Again Tom gave me a meaning look, and I wondered whether the thoughts which suggested those looks could be correct.

"Was Senor Garcia with you?" I said at last.

"No," said the notary; "he left us within ten minutes of our quitting this house, or he might have helped us to

beat the scoundrels off. Only think, senor—two hundred and five ounces of pure gold!”

“For which you are answerable?” I said, inquiringly.

“No, no,” said the notary. “I would not take it to be answerable, only at the Senor Don Garcia’s risk.”

“But why does not your uncle come back, Harry?” said my aunt uneasily. “He would not be out of the way now unless there was something very particular to keep him.”

“We’ll go and have another look, Aunt,” I said. “We may find him somewhere in the plantation.”

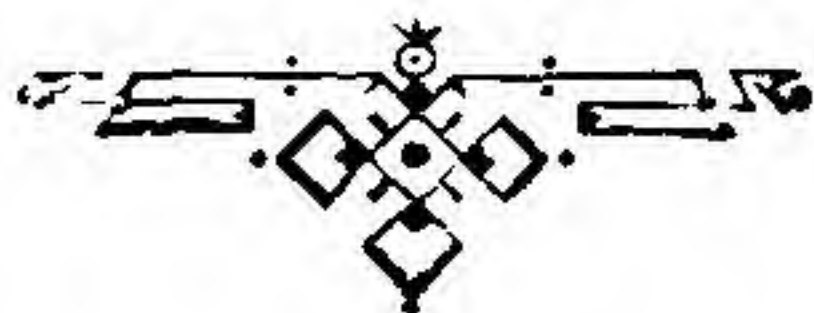
Signing to Tom to follow, I walked out to stand beneath the verandah till Tom joined me.

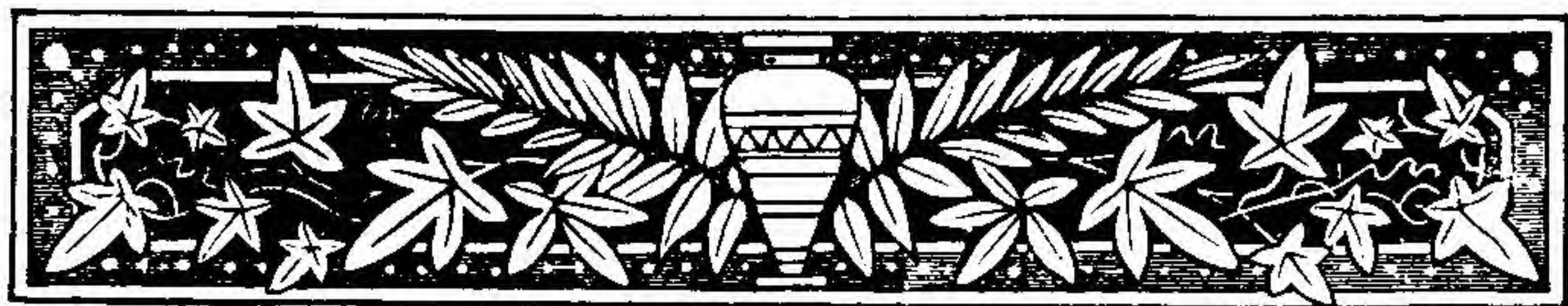
“They’ve got it all back again, Mas’r Harry, safe,” said Tom gloomily, as soon as he stood facing me.

I did not answer.

“And we shall have to look pretty sharp to get the rest away,” he continued, prophetically.

“Never mind the gold, Tom,” I said, with a strange uneasy feeling troubling me. “Let us first see what has become of my uncle.”





CHAPTER XXXIX.

MISSING.

GOING out to one of the sheds across the yard I called together the Indians who were regularly employed as labourers on the farm, and told them that their master was wanted directly on business, requesting them all to spread themselves over the cultivated land, and to try and find him.

To my utter astonishment the elder of the party raised one hand with the palm outwards, uttered a few words, and one and all the Indians returned to their work.

"They didn't understand you, Mas'r Harry," said Tom. "Tell them again."

I spoke to the men once more, but they maintained a gloomy silence. Then, and then only, I resorted to threats, to find a wonderful unanimity of purpose amongst them, for every man's hand in an instant was on his knife, and they were evidently prepared to offer a fierce resistance.

"Come away, Mas'r Harry," said Tom uneasily; "we don't want no fighting now; but this seems rum, the men turning like that all of a sudden."

"I'm afraid that there's a sort of freemasonry existing amongst them, Tom," I said, "and these men are evidently under orders. But let us see whether my uncle has re-

turned, for I begin to be afraid that this gold is about to bring a curse with it."

"I don't believe in no curses, Mas'r Harry; but we ain't a going to be allowed to get it away without a deal of dodging, and perhaps a scrimmage. They've got part of it back, Mas'r Harry, but I don't think they'll get the big lot unless we go and show them where we've stowed it away."

I hurried into the house to find that the old notary had fallen asleep, while my aunt was uneasily walking about.

"Have you found him, Harry?" she exclaimed.

"Not yet, Aunt. I thought he might have returned."

Without waiting to hear her reply I ran back to Tom, who was watching the Indians.

"Look here, Mas'r Harry," he exclaimed. "Here's just the very spot where we left your uncle, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, this is just in view of those Indian chaps, and so is the way into the house all in full view of them."

"Quite right, Tom."

"Well, nothing couldn't have taken place without them seeing it. But something did take place, and I'll tell you why. If Mas'r Landell had only walked off somewhere to see how his coffee or cocoa was growing, and where it wanted hoeing up, do you think that Muster Indian there would have been above saying so? Not he, Mas'r Harry. But what does he do now? Why, he turns stunt, and won't answer a word; and what does that show, eh? Why, that, as I said before, we didn't ought to have left your poor uncle, who's been knocked on the head, and robbed, and then hidden away. Well, do you know what we've got to do now, Mas'r Harry?"

"Search for him, of course," I said emphatically

“To be sure, and both together, or we may get knocked on the head too; and I shouldn’t like that on account of Sally Smith and Miss—”

“Tom,” I said, “your tongue runs too fast. Let us have more action. Come along. And as to your knocking-on-the-head work, we have nothing to fear there so long as we have no gold about us.”

“Gently there, Mas’r Harry,” said Tom. “We’ve got no gold about us, I know; but how many people know that, eh? Well, I’ll tell you—*two*; and I’m one, and you’re the other. You keep a sharp look-out, and don’t you trust nobody at all with a red skin, and only two or three who have got white.”

As we conversed we kept on advancing towards the plantation rows, when Tom stooped down so as to gaze intently at the ground, and then trotted slowly along, as if seeking for a place where the grass was broken down—an example I followed, to halt at length, with the Indians watching me intently from the shed as I reached a spot nearly opposite to the part of the verandah where I had parted with my uncle.

“Come here, Tom!” I said in a low voice; and he ran up. “What do you think of this?”

“Been beaten down and then smoothed over again,” said Tom excitedly. “Something has been dragged over here, Mas’r Harry.”

“So I thought, Tom,” I exclaimed. “Now let us try whether an Englishman can follow a trail; for it looks as if my uncle must have passed along here.”

There was evidently a display of some little excitement amongst the Indians in the shed as we took our first steps along a well-marked track.

“They saw it, Mas’r Harry!” exclaimed Tom. “Look at ’em.”

I did not answer, for my eyes were glued to the track, which now showed plainly that a body had been dragged along through the tender herbage in a perfectly straight line; and I was not long in perceiving that the track went in the direction of the little wood where Lilla had had her terrible adventure with the snake.

The affair began to show now in blacker colours each moment; and I shuddered at last as I stopped short, and pointed to a plainly-to-be-seen smear upon a broad frond.

“Blood, Mas’r Harry!” exclaimed Tom hoarsely; and then I heard him mutter to himself—“Poor Mas’r Landell!”

We pushed on, to find the same track still; the heavy body that had been dragged over the young plantation growth leaving it bruised and broken beyond the elastic power of the plants to recover themselves. Two or three times the track made a sudden turn, as if he who made it had sought to avail himself of an inequality in the ground; and then, once more, it went right away for the forest, in whose depths it disappeared.

Twice more we had both shuddered as we observed the faint smears of blood upon some leaf; but there was a stern determination in my breast to see the adventure to the end; for I felt that it was to a great extent due to me that my uncle had been stricken down—for stricken down he must have been, I now felt sure.

Following Tom’s example, I drew and cocked a pistol; and then we pushed aside the foliage, which grew densely as soon as we had passed through the plantation, moving

forward cautiously, and expecting to see an enemy spring up from every tuft of thick growth.

"Why, the trail goes right down where the snake went, Mas'r Harry!" cried Tom suddenly.

"Towards the river, Tom," I said huskily; for it was now plain enough; and my heart seemed to stand still, and my breath to come in gasps, as my imagination conjured up horror after horror that must have befallen the free, generous hearted man who had ever given me so warm a welcome to his home.

"Keep a sharp look-out, Mas'r Harry," whispered Tom, as a rustling amongst the bushes and swamp-loving grass told of something rapidly retreating towards the river.

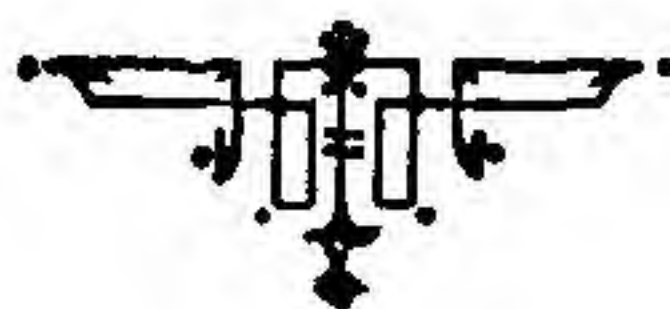
Then once more the trail turned off, and it was plain enough to see that it was now pointing right for the thick reed and cane-brake where we had slain the jaguar; and my heart told me plainly enough that, if this track had been made by some one dragging my uncle's body, it was in order to dispose of it in the great reptile-haunted stream.

There was a strangely strong inclination to stay back and leave Tom to finish the adventure, but with an effort I crushed it down; and now, close abreast, we crept on, pushing the reeds and canes aside as we entered the brake, sinking to our knees at every stride, and feeling to our horror that the ooze beneath our feet was alive with little reptiles.

"Make haste, Tom!" I cried, shuddering in spite of my efforts to drive away the tremor I felt.

Tom responded to my words, and we were pushing and forcing our way on, when the horror that was oppressing

me would have its way, and—be it boyish, unmanly, what you will—I gave vent to a cry, torn from me by the extreme dread I felt as my further progress was stayed by something invisible to me amongst the thick reeds, suddenly seizing me by the leg.





CHAPTER XL.

MY UNCLE'S ADVENTURE.

“**L**ET me get a shot at him, Mas'r Harry!” cried Tom excitedly. “Hold up—don't go down, whatever you do. It's one of them great beasts—I know it is. There's thousands of 'em here.”

As if to prove the truth of Tom's words, one of the monsters dashed, half-running, half-wallowing, by us while, completely unnerved, I could do nothing but stand motionless as Tom beat the canes aside and tried to get a clear view of that which held me.

“Why, Mas'r Harry!” he exclaimed in tones I could hardly understand, “who ever saw such a game as this?”

Tom's words brought me to myself, and, looking down, I found that which clasped me so tightly was a man's hand—my uncle's!

Angry with myself for my cowardice, the next moment I was down upon my knees helping to extricate him from the position in which he lay, with one arm still bound to his side, and the dark cloth garment from which Tom had shaken the gold bound round and round his head and face, effectually gagging him; and if the intention of his captors had been to suffocate him, they had nearly effected their purpose.

"Uncle!" I exclaimed, as I held his head up and he began to draw his breath more freely.

"I thought it was all over, my boy, when I heard your voice," he said faintly, and evidently not without considerable effort.

With some difficulty we got him upon his legs; but until we had thoroughly chafed them he could not take a step, so tight had been the bonds with which he had been confined.

But at last he seemed to exert himself to the utmost; and, sometimes leaning on Tom's arm, sometimes on mine, we went slowly along the track we had made to the great prostrate tree, where, after a hasty glance around to make certain that no serpents were in the way, we sat down to rest, and my uncle, unasked, began to speak.

"I must sit down for a few minutes, my lad," he said, "and then we will make haste on, for those women must not be left for an instant more than we can help. The gold has all gone, though, Harry."

"Uncle," I exclaimed, "it seems as if my thirst for gold is bringing down a curse upon your peaceful home."

"Not so fast, my lad—not so fast. Gold is a very good thing in its way, and helped me this morning out of a terrible difficulty. Remember that it set me free from Garcia."

"And they've got it all back from him again," chuckled Tom.

"What!" exclaimed my uncle.

"Knocked the poor old lawyer about and grabbed all the bars," said Tom.

My uncle seemed astonished at the news, but his brow knit the next minute.

"Never mind, Harry," he said, "we'll risk the curses of the gold. I'll help you, my lad, to the last gasp; and if we don't get the treasure safe on board some vessel bound for old England, it sha'n't be for want of trying. But you must give me time, lad—you must give me time; for, what with Garcia's bullet and this blow on the head, I'm as weak as a child."

"But how was it, Uncle?" I exclaimed anxiously.

"Give me your arm, lad, and let's make haste back to the hacienda. You, Tom, keep that pistol in your hand cocked, and walk close behind; and if you see one of those lurking copper-skins jump up, shoot him down without mercy. You know how you both left me to go into the house, where I meant to put the gold into a chest in my little office? Well, I stood looking at you for a few moments, Hal, and then I had taken a step forward, when I felt myself dashed to the ground by a tremendous blow upon the head; hundreds of lights danced before my eyes, and then all was darkness, from which I came to myself with the sensation of being suffocated by something bound over my face. I felt, too, that my hands and arms were tightly bound, and that I was quite helpless, for I could not cry out. I did not feel much troubled, though, for a heavy, sleepy feeling was on me. All I wanted was to be left alone, while instead of that I could feel that I was being dragged slowly along over the ground; and then at last came a stoppage, and I knew that I was left."

My uncle stopped for a few minutes, apparently exhausted, but he soon recovered himself and went on:

"I struggled hard to get at liberty; but, do all I would, I could only get one hand and arm loose as far as the

elbow, while as to freeing my legs and face, that I soon found to be impossible; and as I lay there I could feel that the muddy ooze was all in motion beneath me with the spawn of those great alligators of the river."

"Wur-r-r-r-a!" ejaculated Tom in a long shudder.

"Over and over again I felt something crawl over me, and once something seized me, gave me a shake, and then let go; but the height of my horror was reached when I felt slowly gliding and coiling upon me what must have been one of the water-boas. I could feel it gradually growing heavier and heavier with the great thick folds lying upon my chest, my legs, and even up to my throat, till the sense of suffocation was horrible, and I lay momentarily expecting to be wrapped in the monster's folds and crushed to death, till suddenly I felt every part of the body in motion, and that it was gliding off me, for the sense of the crushing weight was going. For a moment I thought it was to enable the beast to seize me, but the next instant I knew what it meant, for I could faintly hear voices, which I rightly judged to have scared the reptile away. Then something touched me as I heard indistinctly the voices close by, and with what little strength I had left I clutched at whatever it was; and you know the rest."

By this time we had reached the edge of the plantation, and I was glancing anxiously towards the hacienda in dread lest anything should have happened. But so far all appeared at peace. It was drawing towards evening and the shadows were lengthening, but the whole place seemed to be sleeping in the gorgeous yellow sunlight, so still and placid looked all around.

Still, indeed! for an ominous change met us upon our

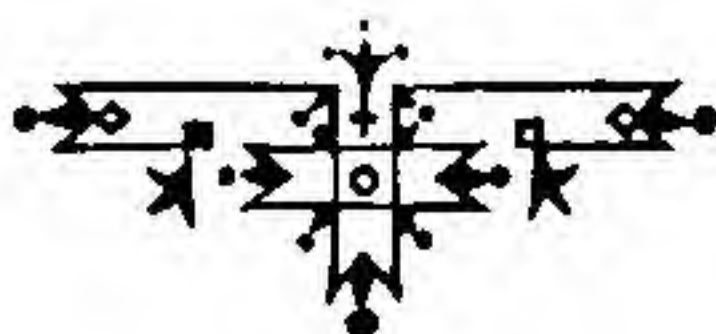
reaching the court-yard. Every Indian labourer, male and female, had gone, and the place was silent and deserted.

"The rats desert the sinking ship, Harry," said my uncle huskily. "For Heaven's sake run in and see if all is well; I dare go no farther!"

I needed no second bidding to rush in and hurry to the room where the wounded Spaniards had lain, to find it deserted.

With a strange clutching at the heart I ran to the inner room and called Lilla by name, when, to my intense delight, she answered, and with my aunt, weak and trembling, she came forth.

We soon learned the cause of the silence about the place. Shortly after I had taken my departure Senor Xeres had roused up from the short sleep into which he had sunk, to express his determination to recommence his journey, declaring that he had nothing now to lose; while, half an hour after, Lilla had seen through one of the verandahs the whole of the labourers glide silently away towards the forest, and then a silence as of death had fallen upon the hacienda.





CHAPTER XLI.

THE ATTACK ON THE HACIENDA.

“**H**ARRY,” said my uncle about sundown, “if I could do as I liked I should rest my cuts and bruises for a few days ; but, as it is, I cannot give up. Now, look here, my lad — here, you, Tom Bulk, don’t shrink away, man—this is as much for your ears as for his. I’ve been thinking this over, and, from what I know of the Indians, I’m quite sure that they mean mischief. It seems hard, but I fear that there will be a fierce attack upon this place before many hours are past; and then, unless we can beat them off, ours will be a bad case. You two must see to the closing up of the bottom of the place, and doing what you can to put it in a state of defence.”

“Uncle,” I said, “is not this almost madness? Here we are, only three. How, then, can we defend such a house as this?”

“It is our only hope,” he said gloomily. “If we had your treasure here, we might try to escape down the river; but as it is, we’ll fight to the last, and then take to the woods.”

“And the cave—eh, Mas’r Landell?” said Tom.

"Tom," I cried joyfully, "why, that would indeed be a place of refuge when all here failed."

"Yes," said my uncle thoughtfully. "I did not think of that. Such a place might indeed be useful for a retreat if we could take with us provisions. But now see about this place. I will not leave here yet—not until we are obliged."

In obedience to his wishes, though with an aching heart, I set to bolting and barring, closing shutters, and providing one or two windows that commanded likely points of assault with mattresses over which we could fire. But all the while I knew well enough that, with anything like a daring attack, the place must be carried directly. The great dread I had, though, was of fire, which I knew would prove the most formidable of adversaries—for a brand applied to one of the posts of the verandah would be sufficient to ensure the total destruction of the light, sun-dried, wooden building.

Meanwhile, on returning, I found that my uncle had nearly forgotten his pains, and was busily arranging such firearms as we had—ample, as it happened; for there were five guns, and he had a couple of brace of pistols, besides those with which we were provided. Ammunition, too, was in fair quantity; while, one way or another, our little garrison could boast of plenty of provision.

"No sleep to-night, Harry," said my uncle, cheerfully. "We must all watch, for the Indians will not be satisfied till they have thoroughly ransacked the place."

"Of course we shall beat them off if possible; but what arrangements have you made for retreat?" I said.

Without a word, my uncle led me into the kitchen of the hacienda, where he had stabled four mules, with plenty of fodder.

"We must get off unseen if we can, my lad," he said, "and the mules will carry plenty of ammunition and food. But about water?"

"Plenty at the cavern," I said.

"Good!" exclaimed my uncle. "And now look here, Harry," he said, leading me to the inner room, and taking down a map, "show me, as nearly as you can, where the cavern lies which contains all this rich treasure."

I examined the map as carefully as I could, and then pointed out the valley in which it seemed to me that, if the map were correct, the cavern must lie.

"You say there is water?" said my uncle—"a stream?"

"Yes, a little rivulet."

"Then that must run down to this river. Good! And here again this river joins the great Apure, which, in its turn, runs into the Orinoco. Once well afloat, we should be pretty safe, and we could reach the mouth of the great river, and from there Georgetown, Demerara. Why, Harry, it could not be above a dozen miles from the mouth of your cave to the water-way that should see us safe on the road homeward."

"But about canoes, uncle?" I said.

"Canoes, my boy? Well, of course, it would be well to have them; but we must not be particular. I have known voyages made on skin-rafts before now; and recollect this, that we shall have the stream to bear us along the whole distance. But there, after all, we may be alarming ourselves without cause."

Tom and I exchanged glances at the mention of the skin-raft, and then we prepared to spend the watchful night.

"I need not hint to you, Hal, about trying to protect

poor Lilla," said my uncle, in tones that bespoke his emotion.

"No," I said, quietly.

My look, I suppose, must have satisfied Lilla, for I received one in return full of trust and confidence in the efforts of my weak arm.

Night at last—beautiful, though anxious night, with the sky deepening from blue to purple, to black, with the diamond-like stars spangling the deep robe of nature till it glistened with their glorious sheen. Around us on every side was the forest, in a greater or less depth, and from it came the many nocturnal sounds—sounds with which I was pretty familiar, but which, upon this occasion, had a more strange and oppressive effect than usual. Boom, whizz, croak, shriek, yell, and moan, mingled with the distant rush of the great river, ever speeding onward towards the sea. At times I could just distinguish the edge of the forest; then there would be the dark plantation spread around, and nothing more.

It was weary work that, watching—stationed at one of the windows—watching till my eyes ached, as I tried to distinguish the many familiar objects by which I was surrounded, and then to make sure that some low bush was not a crouching or crawling enemy, approaching by stealth nearer and nearer, ready for a deadly spring.

It was just the time for anxious troubled thought, and the gold lay like a dead weight upon my conscience. At that moment I could have gladly given it all wherewith to purchase safety for those beneath this roof.

I was startled from anxious reverie by a whisper at my side, and turning I found that it was Lilla, the bearer of

a message from my uncle that he would like me to come to him for a few minutes.

I had scarcely mastered the message, standing there close to the open window, when the words upon my lips were arrested, and my heart beat fast, as now, unmistakably no chimera of the brain, I could see six or seven figures glide out of the darkness towards the house, straight to where I stood with Lilla.

Nearer they came, stooping down and apparently making for the shade of the verandah, till they stopped within a couple of yards of us, and began whispering in what seemed to be broken Spanish, or the *patois* of the Indians. Then I felt my hands clutched more tightly than ever, as a voice that I recognized in an instant uttered a few words that sounded like an order, given as it was in a tongue very little of which I could comprehend, catching only a word or two, while my imagination supplied the rest.

It was plain enough that, perhaps ignorant of his loss, perhaps condoning it, Garcia had made common cause with the Indians, and Lilla was to be saved before fire was applied to the hacienda.

For a few moments there was a dead silence, and then the party glided along under the verandah.

"What was that Garcia said?" I then whispered to Lilla.

I knew that my interpretation must have been pretty correct from the start Lilla gave, and then her shudder.

"I dare not tell you," she said, with a half sob.

Then leaving the window, after softly closing and securing it, we hurried, hand in hand, to my uncle.

"How long you have been!" he whispered.

"There was a party of six or seven by my window," I said; "Garcia heading them."

"Then I was right!" he exclaimed anxiously. "I thought—"

The next moment my hand was upon his lips; for, dimly seen through the narrow aperture left, from which my uncle watched, were four dark figures; while at the same moment there was a sharp cracking noise, as of breaking woodwork, from another part of the house.

"Am I to shoot or ain't I? Is Mas'r Harry there?" whispered a voice from out of the darkness. "Because they're trying to break in here."

"You must fire, Tom," said my uncle huskily; "and mind this, if they do break in, our only hope is in the kitchen, which is stone built and strong. Make your way there."

"Right, Mas'r Landell," said Tom coolly.

Then we heard him glide off.

"Lilla, join your mother in there," I heard my uncle then whisper.

Directly after I knew we were alone.

"Harry," said my uncle, "it seems to me that we ought to have beaten a retreat; but it is too late to talk of that. Our only hope now is by giving them a sharp reception. If we can keep them at bay till daylight we shall have a better opportunity of escaping."

"I don't agree with you," I said. "I think our hopes should be in the darkness."

Drawing near to the window, my remarks were cut short by the sharp report of a gun, followed in a few seconds by another, when the crashing noise, evidently made by the tearing down of the jalousie bars at one

window, suddenly ceased, and a loud shriek rang out upon the night air.

We neither of us spoke, as we listened attentively, to hear the next moment the sound made by a ramrod in a gun-barrel, and we knew that Tom was safe.

"They've gone from my window now, Mas'r Landell," whispered a voice at our elbow; "and they won't come back there, I think, seeing how hot it was. But, harken there, isn't that them trying somewhere else?"

There was no mistaking the sound. Strong hands were striving to tear down a jalousie at the other end of the house; and, hurrying there, my uncle fired, just as several dimly seen dark figures were beating in the window.

"Crack—crack!" two sharp reports from my uncle's gun; but this time, as their flashes lit up the room where we stood, the fire was replied to by half a dozen pieces, but fortunately without effect.

Then again fell silence, with once more the same result, that of a breaking jalousie at an upstairs window.

"They've swarmed up the verandah posts, lads," said my uncle thickly; "but you two stay by your windows—you at this, Harry; you, Tom, at the other."

We heard him steal away to the staircase, and then Tom left my side. The next instant came a loud report from upstairs, then a crash as of a falling body on the lattice-work of the verandah, and directly after a dull thud outside the window.

I had no time for thought, though, for incidents now began to succeed each other with such startling rapidity. As the dull thud came upon the bricks beneath the verandah it seemed to me that the darkness outside the window before which I stood was gradually growing

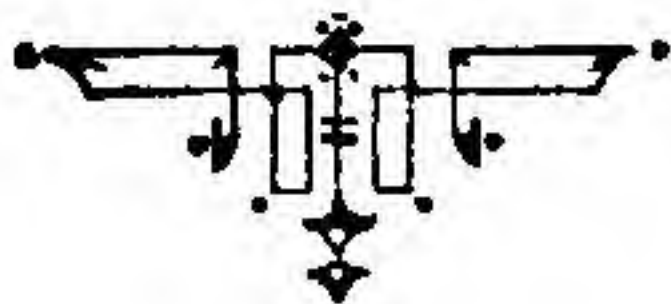
deeper. Another instant, and I knew the reason as I levelled my heavily loaded double gun.

Was I to destroy life? my heart seemed to ask me, but only for the reply to come instantly. Yes, if I wished to help and save the women beneath our charge; and then I drew rapidly, one after the other, both triggers. There was a gurgling, gasping cry, and the darkness grew less dense.

“Crack—crack!” both barrels again from Tom’s part of the house. It was evident, then, that we had neither of us returned to our old posts too soon.

I hastily reloaded, wondering from whence would come the next attack; but I had not long to wait, for three or four sharp discharges came through the window, striking the plaster of wall and ceiling, so that it crumbled down upon me in showers.

Again and again I trembled for those in the kitchen; but the recollection of my uncle’s words encouraged me; and, trusting in the strength of its stone walls, I began to grow excited, firing and loading, till all at once, as if by common consent, there was a cessation of the discharges, followed by an ominous silence.





CHAPTER XLII.

FLIGHT AND ITS ARREST.

I WOULD have given anything to have left my post just then, so as to have seen after the welfare of those who were anxiously awaiting the result of the attack; but I felt that such a proceeding might prove dangerous, and an entry be made during my brief absence.

But a minute had not elapsed before my uncle was at my side.

"They are all safe in the kitchen, Harry," he said. "But what does this mean?"

"Only a minute or two's halt before they make a fiercer attack," I said.

"No 'tain't," said Tom, who had stolen up unobserved; "they're agoing to set us alight, and I've come to tell you."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed my uncle. "They'll never burn the place till they have searched and plundered it."

"I quite think with you, Uncle," I said.

"But they're a striking lights round my side," said Tom. "Come and look!"

We hurriedly passed round to Tom's post, just in time to see the truth of his words, for as we peered cautiously

from his window there was a little flickering tongue of flame apparently dancing towards one end of an outhouse. Then it was applied to the thatched roof, and a howl of joy arose as the flame ran rapidly up towards the ridge.

Directly after, though, there arose a shout of rage, and more than one voice, so my uncle said, crying out for the fire to be extinguished; amongst which voices that of Garcia could plainly be heard.

The firing was evidently premature, and efforts were directly made to extinguish it.

A glance, though, showed that the attempt would be in vain; for, with a sharp hissing and crackling noise, the light material began to blaze rapidly, and my uncle gave a groan as he saw that his house was doomed to destruction.

A loud voice now shouted what were evidently orders, and a pattering of feet succeeded, as a fierce struggle now began, to tear out the blazing part of the outhouse before it reached the hacienda, against whose sides it was reared.

"Now is the time for escaping, Uncle," I whispered, as I thought how easily we could have brought down a dozen or so of our assailants, whose dark figures stood out well against the fire.

"Yes," he said slowly; "we must make the venture now, for in an hour the old place will be level with the ground."

Then, casting off his lethargy, he hurriedly made for the kitchen, closely followed by Tom and myself, when we closed after us, and thoroughly barricaded, the inner door, while my uncle unfastened and looked out cautiously from that which led into the yard.

All was still on that side—not an enemy to be seen—when, hastily finishing the loading of the mules with the provisions, arms, and ammunition, Lilla was placed on one, my aunt on the other, and we had just determined upon opening the door to start across the yard, when a loud shout told that the enemy had made an entrance, and directly after we could hear footsteps coursing all over the house, as if in search of the gold that they expected to find; whilst one voice, which I twice heard shouting, sent a thrill through my body.

“Quick, Uncle!” I exclaimed, “before they find the kitchen door.”

“It is almost madness to try and escape, my lad,” said my uncle despondently. “Had we not better fight it out from here?”

“No,” I exclaimed fiercely, as I threw open the door and gave a glance out, to see that this side of the house was in shadow, while a bright light was beginning to illumine the trees around. “No; let us make for the forest. Tom, bring the two pack-mules. Uncle, lead the other.”

Then taking the bridle of Lilla’s mule in one hand, gun in the other, I led the way, trembling all the while with excitement, for we could hear the shouts of the searchers, and, above all, those of Garcia. It seemed that every moment they must be upon us; but all four mules were led out at last and stood in the black shadow over on that side of the house.

“Don’t leave me, Harry!” whispered a voice at my side.

For an instant I wavered, and that instant nearly sealed our fate.

“Only for a few moments,” I said huskily.

I rushed to the kitchen door, dragged out the key, and inserted it on the outer side, with the Indians beating the while at the inner door, which was rapidly giving way, as they seemed now to have determined that it was here we had taken refuge.

Then I had the door to, locked it, and hurled away the key into the plantation, just as, with a crash, the inner door succumbed; and, headed by Garcia, the party of Indians rushed into the kitchen, to utter howls of rage and disappointment on finding it empty, and then began battering the door I had that moment locked.

Fortunately for us, the window was strongly barred; but I knew that some of them must be round directly; and dashing to Lilla's bridle, “Come along!” I whispered hoarsely, and I led the mule towards the nearest packing shed.

To reach this place part of our way was in black shadow, the rest across a broad glowing band of light, after which we could hurry along behind two or three long low coffee sheds, keeping them between us and the fire, when the plantation trees would shelter us, I knew, till we could reach the forest.

“Quick—quick!” I exclaimed. “To the left of the shed!”

The yells behind us were fearful, the light of the fire growing momentarily more intense, for the flames were running swiftly up one side of the house, with the effect of broadening the glowing belt which we had to pass, when, if an eye was turned towards us, or the kitchen door were to give way, I knew that our efforts had been in vain, and that we should be overtaken and surrounded in a minute.

An anxious passage of only a few seconds' duration, and I had led Lilla across, my uncle had followed with Mrs. Landell, and Tom was close behind, when one of his mules turned restive, stopping short in the full glare of the flames, and I felt choking with rage and despair.

There was another shout as the flames shot higher—another shout and another close at hand, with the pattering of feet, to show that the Indians were running round to our side of the house, when I saw Tom stoop for an instant, and his restive mule gave a bound; and then, as a chorus of yells smote our ears, we were once more in the shadow, hurrying along past first one and then another shed, which formed a complete screen, though the glare was momentarily growing brighter.

"I don't like using the point of a knife for a spur, Mas'r Harry," said Tom to me, as, leaving Lilla's bridle once more for a moment, I ran back to urge him on; "but, blame this chap, he was obliged to have it, and he won't turn nasty no more. Never mind me—I'll keep up if I can, and you shall have the stuff I've got. If I can't keep up, why, I must be left behind, and you must save the ladies; but don't hang back for me."

I squeezed Tom's hand and ran on, to find Lilla trembling so that she could hardly keep her seat; then, as she clung convulsively to my arm, we passed the shadow of the last shed, but not until we had paused for a few moments to listen to the chorus of savage yells in our rear.

"Now, Uncle!" I exclaimed.

"But where do you make for?" whispered my uncle.

"The great cave," I said.

As I spoke we issued from the friendly shadow and passed on.

It seemed as if that plantation would never be passed and the shade of the great black forest reached. The yells continued louder than ever, startling us by proceeding from unexpected spots, which showed us that the Indians, certain now of our evasion, were spreading in all directions.

"Another fifty yards," I whispered to my uncle over my shoulder, "and then safety."

For the great dense trees now rose like a large bronzed wall right in front; and though full of dangers, we were ready enough to dare those sooner than the peril of meeting the fierce party of Indians who sought our lives.

We pushed forward now, heedless of shout and cry, though some of them appeared to come from close by on our left. There was the forest which was to prove a sanctuary, and at last the cocoa-trees were behind, and we were parting the dense growth that now hid from us the glow of the burning house.

"There is a track more to the right, Harry," whispered my uncle.

Turning in that direction, I hurried the mule, burning as I did to get on to the direct route to the cavern. I had whispered a few encouraging words to Lilla, and was then thinking how my locking the kitchen door had retarded the enemy and given us time to escape, when I felt that, worn out and overcome by the excitement and terrors of the night, my companion had given way and was sinking, fainting, from the saddle.

By an effort, though, I kept her in her place, and whispered to my uncle to take the lead, so that our mule might follow.

He did so; and then, with the cries of the searching

Indians still ringing in our ears, we pushed on till, under my uncle's guidance, we reached the open track, and I whispered to him the direction we had followed to reach the cave.

"I think if we pursue this path for about a mile, Harry, we can then turn off to the right and reach your track—that is, if we do not lose our way."

So spoke my uncle; and then, all burdened as I was, I levelled my gun and uttered a warning cry to my companions; for there was a rustling on our left, a heavy panting, and then with a loud and triumphant yell a couple of savages sprang out into the dim twilight of the open space where we were standing.

"Let them have us all dead, not living, Hal," said my uncle, his sad tones giving place to those of fierce excitement.

And he, too, levelled his piece just as, with a fresh burst of yells, the savages dashed on.

Two loud, echoing reports—two dimly-seen, shadowy figures falling back into the underwood—and then we were hurrying along the track as fast as we could urge the mules.

"There is another path farther on, Harry," said my uncle; "we must reach that."

Onward, then, we went through the gloomy shades, black now as night could make them, not even daring to pause to try whether we could detect the sounds of pursuit. That the reports of our guns would bring the Indians to that spot we had no doubt, but I was hopeful that they might not at first find the bodies of their companions; and if they did not, I knew that all endeavours

to trace us by the mule-trail until the morning would be futile.

Now the way was of pitchy blackness, then an opening would give us a glimpse of the stars. The track was found and pursued for a long distance, and then my uncle called a halt, and we listened for some minutes for tokens of pursuit, but all was now still save the nocturnal cries of the inhabitants of the wilderness through which we were passing.

Tom standing now close up, my uncle asked me if I thought I could recognize where we were.

I could not; but Tom made a sort of circle, examining some of the great tree-trunks around.

"It's all right, Mas'r Harry," he said; "we're on the right track for Goldenland. That's it, straight away there to the left."

"But are you sure, Tom?" I said. "Recollect how important it is that we should be right."

"Well, so I do," said Tom gruffly. "But there, if you won't believe one donkey, you perhaps will another. Now, look ye here, Mas'r Harry, this here left-hand mule of mine is one of them as we took with us to the cave, and we'll have his opinion. If he goes off to the right, I'm wrong; but if he remembers the way and goes off to the left, why, it's being a witness in my favour. Now, then, moke, cock them old long ears of yours and go ahead."

As he spoke Tom led one of his mules to the front, gave it a clap on the back, and it trotted forward and went off down the dark track Tom had declared for.

"Now, who's right, Mas'r Harry?" said Tom triumphantly, as he halted at the opening into the ravine, just as, far above us, we could see, pale, cold, and stately,

mountain peak after mountain peak, whose icy slopes were just growing visible, lit by the faint streak in the east which told of the coming day.

Tom led on again, and by degrees the familiar sides of the ravine became more and more steep and craggy, the way grew narrower, the music of the little rill was audible; and at last, just as the sun was rising, we reached the rocky barrier of the great cave, and prepared to halt.

But there was no occasion. Tom's left-hand mule slowly began to climb the rocks, the second mule followed, as did those ridden by my aunt and Lilla, without word or urging, and we were just congratulating ourselves upon our escape, when Tom, who had crept close to me as I turned for an instant to peer back along the valley, pointed with one hand towards the left side where the crags stood out most roughly.

I followed his pointing finger and then started, as I was just in time to see a dark form, barely visible in the shadow beneath some overhanging rocks, crawl silently away with a stealthy, cat-like motion.

"Jaguar, Tom?" I said, though my heart gave my lips the lie.

"Indian!" said Tom laconically; and then I knew that our coming would soon be spread through the tribe of those who constituted the guardians of the treasure, for this was evidently one posted as a sentinel to watch still the sacred place where the treasure might yet again be brought to rest when those who were its enemies should sleep.



CHAPTER XLIII.

TRACKED.

I WAS obliged to acknowledge that it was more than we could expect to reach the cavern without being discovered, and that we ought to be well content to have gained a haven of safety without loss or injury; but all the same my heart sank, and I had hard work to keep back the feeling of despair that, cold and deadening, came upon me.

The thoughts I have set down here flashed through my brain almost momentarily, but I was brought back to the necessity for action by a motion now made by Tom.

"Shall I, Mas'r Harry?" he said. And he covered the retreating Indian with his gun.

"No," I said, arresting him. "It would only be more bloodshed, and would not prevent our being discovered."

The next moment I thought that I was wrong, and that the destruction of that one foe might be our saving. But it was too late now; the Indian had disappeared.

I led the way farther in till the increasing darkness compelled a halt, and I said a few words of encouragement to the shuddering companions of our travel.

"Tom," I then said—for the thought had that moment struck me—"we have no lights."

Tom did not reply, but plunged into the darkness ahead; when, after a while, we could hear the clinking of flint and steel, followed, after a short interval, by a faint light, towards which one of Tom's mules directly began to walk, closely followed by the rest.

"Is it safe to go on?" said my uncle.

"Quite," I replied. "I don't think any enemies would be here."

I was divided in my opinions as to which way we should go. It was most probable that the Indians would be aware of the existence of the bird-chamber, but would they penetrate to it? I should much rather have made that our retreat; but at last I felt that I hardly dared, and that, if I wished for safety, we must take to the rift beyond the vault of the troubled waters, leaving the mules in the farthest corner by the arch of the tunnel.

Leading the way, then, they followed me right away into this land of gloom and shadow, my brain being actively employed the while as to our defence of our stronghold.

At last we reached the farthest chamber, below the rocky tongue which projected over the great gulf; and then, after securing the mules, with Tom's help, and to the great astonishment of my uncle, I fitted together the little raft, placed upon it the store of provisions, and then secured it to a piece of rock, ready at any moment for us to embark and continue our retreat along the tunnel; for I had come to the conclusion that it would be better not to expose the women to the terrors of the water passage unless absolutely obliged.

Thus prepared for escape, I felt better satisfied; and after partaking of some refreshment, and urging Lilla

and my aunt to try and obtain some rest upon the sandy floor, which was here clean and dry, I whispered to Tom to follow; and, this time in the dark, we began to thread our way towards the entrance.

When we had left them about fifty yards behind we turned to gaze back, to see only the faintest glimmer of the candle they had burning; while at the end of another minute there was nothing but black darkness, for the passage had narrowed and wound round a huge block of stone.

It was slow work, but I wanted to grow more familiar with the way; and at last, by persevering, we passed the vault where was the opening to the bird-chamber, and then pressed on till, nearing the entrance, we proceeded with more caution, for I was quite prepared to see a cluster of savages collected in the mouth of the great subterranean way.

The caution was needed, for upon proceeding far enough we could hear the buzz of voices, and a glance showed me Garcia and a full score of his dark-skinned followers.

In a few moments they crossed the rocky barrier and I could see that they were all armed with pine splints and preparing to light them. It was evident, too, that there was a feeling of awe existing amongst the party, many of the savages hanging back till, by fierce and threatening gestures, Garcia forced them farther in.

"He's at the bottom of half the mischief, Mas'r Harry," whispered Tom. "The Indians are after the gold, and he's after Miss Lilla; so they've joined hand. Let me bring him down, Mas'r Harry; there's a good chance now."

My only reply was to lay my hand upon Tom's arm, and then we watched till fire was obtained, the pine

torches lit, and, half driven by Garcia, the Indians led the way towards where we crouched.

Compelled thus to retreat, we hurried back for some distance, our part being easy, for we had the black darkness, the knowledge of the way, and the excessively slow, timid advance of the enemy in our favour.

On came the Indians, with their flashing torches lighting up in a beautiful though weird way each passage and vault through which they passed, and still we retreated before them, wondering at their silence; for Garcia's was the only voice heard beyond a whisper, and even his was subdued, as if the gloomy grandeur had some little influence upon his mind.

Twice over there was a halt, and we learned that the Indians were striving to return, till by violent threats and expostulations Garcia once more urged them on.

I did not wish to shed blood, otherwise we could have brought down enemy after enemy at our leisure, while I could not but think that the loss of one or two of the party would have produced a panic. There was still, though, this for a last resource; and I kept feeling hopeful that the party would return, or else take the way which led to the bird-chamber.

My latter surmises were correct, for, upon crossing the large vault, and gaining a good post of observation, we saw the Indians stop short and elevate their torches, pointing out the opening which led to the great guano-filled chasm, when Garcia placed six men there, evidently as sentinels, and collecting the rest, made a tour of the vault, and then pointed down the rift where Tom and I were hidden—the passage which led to the great gulf.

“No, no, no!” chorused the Indians, giving vent to their negative in a wild despairing fashion.

Then they all threw themselves upon their knees upon the rocky floor and began to crawl back.

Garcia raged and stormed, but it soon became evident that if he explored the passage where we were, it must be alone. Superstitious dread was evidently at the bottom of it all, and I breathed more freely as I felt that for the present, unless he could overcome his companions’ terror, we were safe.

The Indians seemed to be willing enough though to pursue the other route, for as soon as they went back to their six fellows they began pointing up at the dark passage and gesticulating, when, feeling probably that he must submit, Garcia changed the position of his sentinels, intending apparently to leave them to guard the passage where we were. But here again there was a new difficulty; when the men found that the others were to depart, they refused at once to be left alone, and at last, after striking one of them down, Garcia had to submit, and sprang up the rocks, torch in hand, followed by all but two, the stricken man and another, who hastily retreated towards the mouth of the cavern.





CHAPTER XLIV.

ILLAPA.

WE were safe yet, and I felt quite hopeful as I thought of what an advantage we, as defenders, possessed in the darkness over an attacking party advancing light in hand. The sight, too, of the superstitious terror of the Indians was cheering, and I again felt assured that should Garcia persevere in his determination to search our part of the cave, he must seek other companions or else come alone.

"Tom," I said then, gently, "we have been away some time now; creep back to my uncle and tell him quietly that the Indians are in the cave, but at present there is no danger to fear. Ask him, though, to put out the light in case they should come this way."

Tom made no answer, but crept away directly, leaving me in that thick darkness watching for the return of the enemy, and wondering whether we should succeed in getting safely away.

My heart sank as I thought of our peril, with the cunning of the savage and the European mingled to fight against us; while, as to our position, we could set them, I was sure, at defiance here; but could we escape to the river? I still hoped that they would not penetrate our

part, forcing us to take to the raft; and at times I began to wonder whether it would not be better to resist their entrance for the sake of saving the mules, unless we could compel these to swim after the raft.

My reverie was broken by the return of Tom.

"All right, Mas'r Harry," he said; "they're in the dark now; but I think Miss Lilla was disappointed because you didn't go. I'll keep watch if you'd like to go."

If I'd like to go! I fought down the desire, though, just as a distant echoing murmur, ever increasing, fell upon our ears, and we knew that the searchers were on their way back.

Another minute, and with their last torch burning dimly they were scrambling down from the rift to the cavern chamber, and then hurrying away as fast as the obscurity would allow.

The hours glided by, and at last it became manifest that there was to be no further search that night, so, with Tom, I cautiously made my way to the mouth of the cavern, to find that the enemy had made their bivouac just by the barrier, a bright fire illumining the broad arch, and ruddying the swarthy faces that clustered round, some standing, some lying about upon the sand, while a couple were evidently sentries and stood motionless a little farther in, gazing towards the interior of the cave.

"No more visitors to-night," whispered Tom.

Together we crept back—no light task—through the densely black maze, but at last we felt our way to where we had watched, when Tom, undertaking to be the first guard, I continued my journey to where Lilla, wearied out, was fast sleeping in her mother's arms.

I told my uncle how we were situated, and then, after partaking of the refreshment he offered me, I lay down for a couple of hours' sleep; but I'm afraid I far exceeded it before I awoke with a start to try and recall where we were. Soon after, though, I was at Tom's side, to find that he had twice been to the cave mouth to see the sentries still posted, and the rest of the Indian party sleeping round the fire.

I should think that four hours must have elapsed, and then, at one and the same moment, I heard Tom's whisper and saw the distant glimmer of approaching lights.

"Look out, Mas'r Harry!"

The lights grew brighter moment by moment, and then we could see once more the party of Indians coming slowly forward, headed by Garcia, upon whose fierce face the torch he carried flashed again and again.

But it soon became evident that the Indians were advancing very unwillingly; and more than once, when, alarmed by the light, one of the great birds went flapping and screaming by, there was a suppressed yell, and the men crowded together as if for mutual protection.

At last they stood together in the centre of the vault, and Garcia made a hasty survey, pausing at last by the passage, where we watched him hold up his light and peer down it, and then turn to his companions.

The conversation we could not understand, but it was evident that Garcia was urging them to follow him, and that they refused.

"Say, Mas'r Harry," whispered Tom, "why, if we could be in the bird-chamber and fire off both guns, how those niggers would cut and run like a lot of schoolboys."

"Hist!" I said softly.

For Garcia was now evidently appealing most strongly to one who appeared to be the leader of the Indians—a tall, bronzed giant of a fellow, who pointed, waved his arms about, and made some long reply.

“I’d give something to understand all that, Mas’r Harry,” whispered Tom.

“He says that if the senor’s enemies and the searchers for the sacred treasure are in this direction, the great spirit who dwells in this part of the cave has flown with them down into the great hole that reaches right through the world.”

“Uncle!” I exclaimed, as he whispered these words close to our ears.

“I was uneasy about you, Harry,” he replied. “But who is that—Garcia? Ah! he will never get the Indians to come here. They dread this gloomy place, and believe it is full of the departed souls of their tribe. I have heard that they will never come beyond a certain point, and this must be the point.”

Standing where we did we could plainly see all that was taking place, even to the working of the excited countenances. Garcia was evidently furious with disappointment, and, as my uncle afterwards informed me, spared neither taunt nor promise in his endeavours to get the Indians forward, telling them that they risked far more from their gods by leaving the treasure-takers unpunished than by going in there after them. He told them that they must proceed now—that it was imperative, and as he spoke in a low, deep voice, it gave us a hint as to our own remarks, for the cavern was like some great whispering gallery, and his words came plainly to us, though few of them were intelligible to my ear.

All Garcia's efforts seemed to be in vain, and the Indians were apparently about to return, when our enemy made a last appeal.

"No," said the Indian, who was certainly the leader; "we have done our part. We have chased them to the home of the great god Illapa, and he will punish them. They took away the great treasure, but have they not brought it back? It would be offending him, and bringing down his wrath upon us, if we did more. If the treasure-seekers should escape, then we would seize them; but they will not, for yonder is the great void where Illapa dwells; and those who in olden times once dared to go as far were swallowed up in the great home of thunder."

The Indian spoke reverently and with a display of dignity, beside which the rage and gesticulations of Garcia looked contemptible.

As a last resource it seemed to strike him that he would once more have the bird-chamber searched, and, appealing to the Indians, they unwillingly climbed up to the ledge for the second time, and disappeared through the rift, leaving Garcia, torch in one hand and pistol in the other, guarding the passage where we crouched; now walking to and fro, now coming close up to enter a few yards, holding his light above his head; but darkness and silence were all that greeted him. I trembled, though, lest he should hear the whinnying of the mules, which, though distant, might have reached to where he stood. At last, to our great relief, he stepped back into the vault, and began to pace to and fro.

For full two hours Garcia walked impatiently up and down there by the torch he had stuck in the sand at the

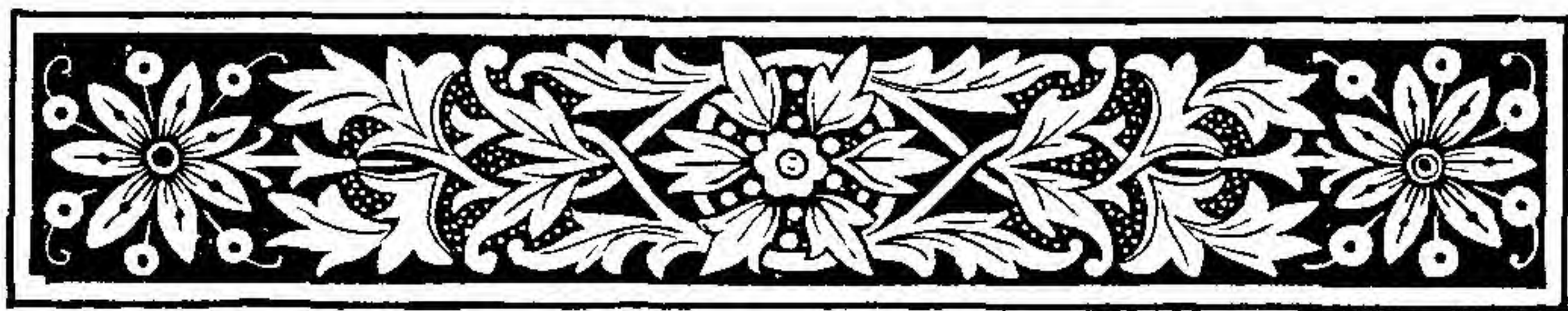
mouth of the passage, and then came the murmurs of the returning voices of the savages, accompanied by shriek after shriek of the frightened birds, scared by the lights which were intruding upon their domain.

As the searching party descended, Garcia hurried towards them, seeing evidently at a glance that they had no tidings, but now using every art he could command to persuade the chief to follow him. He pointed and gesticulated, asserting apparently that he felt a certainty of our being in the farther portion of the passage where his torch was stuck. But always there was the same grave courtesy, mingled with a solemnity of demeanour on the chief's part, as if the subject of the inner cavern was not to be approached without awe.

"We are safe, Harry," my uncle breathed in my ear at last.

For it was plain that, satisfied that their work was done, the Indians were about to depart, when, apparently half mad with rage and disappointment, Garcia cocked the pistols he had in his belt, replaced them, and then, gun in one hand and torch in the other, he strode towards the passage, evidently with the intention of exploring it alone.

The next moment a wild and mournful cry arose from the savage party, while their chief seemed staggered at Garcia's boldness, but recovering himself, he dashed forward, caught the half-breed by the arm, and strove to drag him back.



CHAPTER XLV.

TAKING A PRISONER.



A FIERCE struggle ensued, during which, for a few moments, the Indian proved the stronger. Garcia's torch was extinguished, and the savage held him by clasping his arms tightly round his waist. Then, with an effort, Garcia shook his adversary off, snatched up a torch stuck in the sand, and was already half a dozen yards down the passage, with our party in full retreat, when, with a yell of horror, the chief bounded after him, overtook him, and the struggle began anew.

An instant more and Garcia's gun exploded, raising a roar of thundering echoes that was absolutely terrific. Rolling volley after volley seemed to follow one another with the rapidity of thought, the very cavern appeared about to be crushed in, and, as we paused for an instant to gaze back, we could see the chief and all his followers upon their knees, their faces bent to the sand, and a dismal wailing chorus of "Illapa! Illapa! Illapa!"—the Indians' name for the god of thunder—could be fairly heard mingling with the rolling of the echoes.

The chief was in the same position, with a burning torch close to his head, for which Garcia now returned, and

stood for a moment hesitating, as he gazed at the prostrate figures behind.

Would he dare to come on? or would he retreat? were now the questions we asked ourselves.

The answer came in an instant, for Garcia was coming slowly on. He paused for a few minutes when he reached the spot where we had watched from, and, stooping behind the rocks, he reloaded his piece; then, with his light above his head and his gun held ready, he pressed on, lighting us, though we were invisible to him, as we kept about fifty yards in advance.

Twice over Tom wanted to fire; but he was restrained, for we hoped that, moment by moment, Garcia would hesitate and turn back. But no; there was still the fierce satanic face, with its retiring forehead and shortly-cut black hair, glistening in the torchlight, ever coming forward out of the darkness, peering right and left, the torch now held down to seek for footprints in the sand, now to search behind some mass of crags.

On came the light nearer and nearer, illumining the gloomy passage, and sending before it the dark shadows of the rocks in many a grotesque form.

From where I stooped I could just catch sight of the sardonic face, with its rolling eyes, which scanned every cranny and crag. Twenty yards—ten yards—five yards—he was close at hand now, when from far off came the low whinny of a mule, followed directly by another.

In an instant Garcia stopped short to listen. Then the sardonic smile upon his face grew more pronounced, and, casting off his hesitation, he once more stepped forward nearer—nearer, till his torch, elevated as it was, shed its

light upon us. But he did not yet distinguish us from the rock around, and the next two steps bore him past, when his eye fell upon the flash of light from my gun-barrel, and, with an ejaculation in Spanish, he turned upon me, and we were face to face. But ere his heart could have made many pulsations Tom's coat was over his head, the torch fell to the ground, to lie burning feebly upon the soil, there was a fierce struggle, and the swaying to and fro of wrestlers, the torch was trampled out, and then in the darkness there was the sound of a heavy fall, and, panting with exertion, Tom exclaimed:

"I'm sitting on his head, Mas'r Harry, and he can't bite now. Just you tie his legs together with your handkercher."

I had thrown the gun aside, and, in spite of a few frantic plunges, succeeded in firmly binding the ancles of the prostrate man together.

"Now, Mas'r Harry," whispered Tom, "take hold of one arm—hold it tight—and we'll turn him over on his face, and tie his hands behind his back. Hold tight, for he's a slippery chap, and he'll make another fight for it. He got away from me once, but I had him again directly. Now, then, over with him! Here, ask your uncle to hold his legs down."

There was a heave, a struggle, and then a half-suffocated voice exclaimed:

"Tom! Harry! are you both mad?"

"Oh, Tom!" I ejaculated; "what have you done?"

"Ketched the wrong bird, Mas'r Harry, and no mistake," muttered Tom, as he hastily set my uncle at liberty. "It was that darkness as done it. He slipped away like an eel just as the light went out."

"Never mind," gasped my uncle. "But what muscles you boys have!"

"He did not go towards the entrance," I whispered excitedly, "and I have his gun. If we are careful we shall have him yet."

Then I could not help shuddering as I rejoiced over the merciful policy we had determined upon; for I thought how easily we might have caused the death of one of our own party.

"It was an unlucky mistake, lads," whispered my uncle; "but we must have him, living or dead."

The rest of the way to where we had left the companions of our trial was so narrow that by pressing cautiously forward I knew that we must encounter Garcia sooner or later.

As we reached the part where the track ran along a ledge we divided, Tom continuing to walk along the ledge to where it terminated in the rocky tongue over the great gulf, while my uncle and I, trembling for those we loved, continued our search by the side of the little stream till we were where the passage widened into the vault where the mules were concealed, when I stopped short, my uncle going forward to search the vault, while I stayed to cut off the enemy's retreat, or to spring up the ledge to the help of Tom.

I heard my uncle's whisper, and one or two timid replies, and then came an interval of anxious silence before my uncle crept back to me.

"I have been all over the place, as near as I can tell, Harry," he whispered. "Can he have passed us?"

"Impossible!" I said. "Uncle, we must have a light."

Without a word my uncle glided away; then I heard a

rustle as of paper; there was the faint glow of a match dipped in a phosphorus bottle, the illumination of a large loose piece of paper, and then a torch was lit, showing us Garcia standing upon the extreme verge of the rocky point over the gulf; and at the same moment he drew the trigger of a pistol, to produce only a flash of the pan, which revealed to him his perilous position.

"Senor Garcia!" I cried loudly, as I climbed up to join Tom on the ledge which he must pass, "you are standing with a great gulf behind and on either side. A step is certain death. You are our prisoner!"

With a howl like that of a wild beast he raised his other pistol and fired—the report echoing fearfully from the great abyss. Then, darting forward, he leaped upon Tom, overturned him, and the next moment he was upon me, and we were in a deadly embrace, rolling down the side of the ledge, over and over in our fierce struggle, till we reached the little stream, whose waters were soon foaming around us.

Garcia was active as one of the jaguars of the forest hard by; but I was young, and my muscles were pretty tough. And, besides, a faint shriek that I had heard as he dashed at me had given me nerve for the struggle.

It is hard to say, though, who would have gained the upper hand, for my principal efforts were directed at preventing him from drawing his knife, whilst I had his arms fast to his side, he all the while striving to free himself.

I began to be hopeful, though, at last, when, by a feint, he got me beneath him, and the next moment he had forced my head beneath the icy waters of the little stream. Very few minutes would have sufficed, for I could feel myself growing weaker; but there was help at hand.

We were dragged out, and by the time I had recovered myself sufficiently to wring the water from my eyes, and, with my temples throbbing, to gaze about, there was Garcia pinned to the ground by Tom, whose foot was upon the villain's throat, and his gun-barrel pointed at his head.

"Now, then, Mas'r Harry," said Tom, "we've got the right one this time anyhow. Here, come and stick your torch in here, Mas'r Landell, and we'll soon make it right."

My uncle did as he was requested; and then, once more, Garcia made a savage fight for his liberty.

But it was in vain; and while I helped to hold him down Tom tightly bound his legs, my uncle performing the same operation with the prisoner's hands.

"That ain't no good, Mas'r Landell," said Tom. "He'll wriggle them loose in no time. Look here, I'll show you. Turn him over."

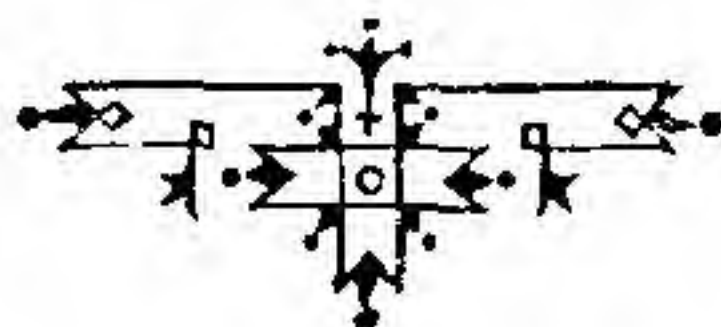
There was no heed paid to the savage glare nor the muttered Spanish oaths of our prisoner, as he was forced over on his face, when, producing some string, Tom placed Garcia's hands back to back, and then tightly tied his thumbs and his little fingers together with the stout twine. A handkerchief was next bound round the wrists, and Tom rose.

"He won't get over that, Mas'r Landell. He'll lie there as long as we like—only, if he don't hold his tongue, we'll stick something in his mouth; and he may thank his stars that he has got off so well. And now, Mas'r Harry, I proposes that we all go back and see what the Indians are doing; and if they are not gone, why, we'll all fire our guns off one after the other, as'll kick up such a hooroar as'll scare 'em into fits."

Tom's advice found favour; but it was not until I had thoroughly satisfied myself of the security of my enemy's bonds that I had the heart to leave.

Then, and then only, we crept cautiously back, till, after a long and painful walk, we perceived the faint glow from the burning torches in the vault of the entrance to the bird-chamber, and on making our way once more, as near as we dared go, we could see that the Indians were clustered together, and anxiously watching the passage.

Stepping back, then, thirty or forty paces, we fired off six barrels in quick succession, with an effect that startled even ourselves, and, had the thundering roar been followed by the falling in of block after block of stone, I, for one, should not have been surprised. It seemed as though the noise would never cease; but when, with the last reverberation dying away, we crept forward, it was only to find that there was darkness everywhere, for the Indians to the last man had fled.





CHAPTER XLVI.

TAKING FLIGHT.

IT was with a feeling of thankfulness that can be well understood that we returned once more to the small cavern, to seek the rest and refreshment of which we were all so much in need.

The words of encouragement we were able to utter respecting our present safety were most thoroughly needed, while the lights we now ventured to burn took off something of the sense of oppression caused by the darkness.

Our arrangements were soon made for one to be always on guard, and trusting to the dread of the Indians for our safety in other directions, we gladly partook of the welcome rest.

At the end of some hours we were seated together to consult upon our future operations, and arrived at the decision that the sooner we set off the better, and the next night was fixed upon for our departure.

“You see, Harry,” said my uncle, “that the difficulty is in journeying through the forest; if once we can strike a stream, the rest is easy.”

“Or would be if we had boats, uncle, or—”

I stopped short, for I had recalled the skin-raft once more, and the possibility of increasing its size. As my

uncle had said, if once we could hit upon a good stream, the rest would be easy, floating ever downward from stream to river, and from river to one of the great water-ways.

Then came the subject of the treasure.

"But are you sure that you have it safe?" said my uncle anxiously.

"As safe, Uncle," as I soon hope to have our other treasures," I said, cheerfully.

A visit to the mouth of the cave showed that all was still, and the valley to all appearance deserted.

But our walk was not unprofitable, for we were able to collect a good bundle of pine-wood for torches, left behind by the Indians—brightly burning, resinous wood, which cast a powerful light when in use.

We found Tom watching his prisoner on our return, and my aunt and Lilla ready to welcome us gladly. But not a sigh was uttered—not a question as to when they might expect to escape; they were patience exemplified.

As to the prisoner, Tom said that he was as sulky as a bear with a sore head. It was a great tie upon us, but upon retaining him in safety rested our success; for it seemed evident that the Indians believed that their share in the matter was at an end, and had gone away strengthened in their belief that it was death to him who penetrated the mysterious portion of the cave, sacred to the thunder god, Garcia not having returned.

My uncle relieved Tom—not to rest, but to aid me in seeking to recover the treasure; but upon a second consideration it was determined not to proceed further until the next morning.

Watching and sleeping in turns, the next morning

arrived, and we once more journeyed to the mouth of the cave.

All in the vale was silent as the grave; not a leaf rustling.

On returning, the mules were well fed, only leaving one more portion. We breakfasted, and the prisoner, compelled at last by hunger, condescended to partake of some food; when we afterwards moved to a narrow part, where our proceedings were to him invisible.

A rather anxious question now arose: what were we to do with him?

We could not leave him bound, to die of starvation in the darkness of the cavern; humanity forbade the thought for an instant. We could not take him with us, neither could we take his life in cold blood, even though our safety depended upon it.

“We must take him a part of the way, and then leave him in some track, where there is a possibility of his being found,” said my uncle. “He ought to die, Harry; but we cannot turn murderers.”

It was evident that our prisoner did not expect much mercy; for we could see that his face was absolutely livid when, pistol in hand, either of us approached to examine his bonds; and once, in his abject dread, he shrieked aloud to Lilla to come and save him from me.

My uncle's seemed the only plan that we could adopt; and leaving him in charge, Tom and I fixed our light at the head of the raft, and, to the horror of Lilla and Mrs. Landell, set off upon our subterranean voyage — one which produced no tremor in us now, for familiarity had bred contempt.

The passage was safely traversed till we came to the

hiding-place of the treasure, when, after a few attempts to fish up the packages, we found that there was no resource but for one of us to plunge boldly into the icy water.

Tom would have gone, but I felt that it was my turn; and after divesting myself of my clothing I lowered myself over the side of the raft, waded a little, and then, after a few tries, succeeded in bringing up, one at a time, the whole of the treasure. Then, with a little contriving, I once more obtained a place upon the heavily-weighted raft, dressed, and we floated back in triumph to where, torch in hand, stood Lilla gazing anxiously along the dark tunnel, and ready to give a joyous cry as she saw our safe return.

I sent Tom to relieve my uncle's guard, and he hurried excitedly to my side and helped me to unload.

"Harry, my boy," he exclaimed huskily as we lifted the packages on to the rocks, "I can hardly believe it. Is it true?"

I smiled in his face, and then with more rope we bound the packages securely before leaving them to drain off the water.

Our next act was to carefully take the raft to pieces and save the bands by which it was secured. This was no easy task, for the water had saturated and tightened the fastenings, which we did not cut, because they would be extremely valuable in fastening it together again.

It proved to be a very, very long job, but we worked at it with all our might, knowing as we did that our future depended upon our getting the pieces of our pontoon safely with us to some stream, where we could fit it

once more together and use it to help in floating down to a place of refuge.

"It's a rum job, Mas'r Harry," said Tom. "My word, if these knots weren't well tied! I never thought about having to undo it over again."

"Never mind, Tom; work away," I cried.

"Oh! Ah! I'll work away," he replied. "That's better! That's one of 'em. They won't bear the lot, Mas'r Harry, when we fits it together again?"

"If the raft is not strong enough, Tom, we must make it stronger," I said; and he gave a grunt and worked away, tugging at the knots and very often using his teeth.

At last, though, we had all the ties secured together in a bunch ready for immediate use—the poles bound in small bundles, and the skins fastened together by their necks, they having the advantage of being very light.

Then followed a pause for rest and refreshment, with a short consultation between my uncle and me as to our plans, which resulted in a busy hour at work, two of the mules being laden then with the gold.

This was a very difficult task, as the packages were so awkward and heavy, the object being to make them secure against any antic on the part of the mules if they became restive, and also to guard against the corners of the plates rubbing the animals' backs.

"I'd give anything to open those bags, Harry," said my uncle. "I feel as curious as a boy."

"Take my word for it, Uncle," I replied, "that they are wonderful treasures. Come, I'll make a bargain with you."

"What is it, my boy?"

"You shall do the unpacking and the breaking up when we set to in safety, and melt them down into ingots."

"If we ever have the chance," he said sadly.

"Don't be down-hearted, Uncle," I cried cheerily. "Recollect we are English, and Englishmen never know the meaning of the word 'fail.'"

"True, my boy," he replied; "but we have our work before us."

"And that's just the work we mean to get done," said Tom, interposing his opinion. "And now just you look here, moke," he continued, addressing the mule he was helping to load—one which kept on laying down its ears and showing its teeth as if it meant to bite—"here am I adoin' all I can to make your load easy and comfortable for your ugly back, and you're saying you're agoing to bite. Am I to kick you in the ribs? 'Cause if you're not quiet I just will."

The mule seemed to understand either Tom's words or the threatening movement of his foot, for it allowed itself to be loaded in peace; and soon after the valuable treasure was declared to be quite safe, though I knew perfectly well that any violent fit of kicking on the part of the obstinate beasts must result in the whole being dislodged.

The next task was to apportion the remainder of our extremely reduced stock of provision between the two mules that my aunt and Lilla were to ride; and upon these mules, on the off-side away from the stirrup, I proposed to secure the light poles and skins of the raft.

"They will be very awkward going amongst the trees," I said, "but it is the best we can do."

"Why not carry them?" said my uncle.

"Because we must have our hands free to use our weapons," I replied.

"True, my lad," he said, "and we might have to drop and not recover them."

"They'll be no end of a bother for the ladies, Mas'r Harry," said Tom. "Lookye here: they sticks'll ride as comfortable as can be atop of the gold bags. Why not have 'em here?"

"Because, Tom, it may be necessary to leave the gold bags behind, and we shall want the raft to escape."

"Leave the gold behind, Mas'r Harry!" he cried; "not if I know it."

"Life is worth more than gold, Tom," I said in reply.

Tom made no answer. He only set his teeth very hard, and the skins and poles were secured just as I wished.

Towards evening, according to arrangement, Tom led the way with one of the gold mules; my uncle followed leading another and bearing a light, and the others required no inducement to keep close behind.

Garcia must have imagined that he was to be left to starve, for he did not see me as I stood back listening to the pattering of the mules' feet upon the hard rock, and the silence that fell directly after when they touched sand; and, raising his voice, he gave so wild and despairing a shriek that my uncle came hurrying back.

"Harry, my dear lad, surely you have not——"

"No, Uncle," I said contemptuously, "I had not even spoken. It was his coward heart that smote him."

Loosening his legs, which of late we had slackened so as to guard against numbness, we made him rise; and

then forcing my arm under his, I led him along till we overtook the last mule bearing my aunt; and then our slow, dark journey was continued till, nearing the entrance, the lights were extinguished and my uncle, taking Tom's place as leader, the latter stole forward, and returned in half an hour to say that the sun had set, and that though he had watched long and carefully from the very mouth of the cave, there was nothing to be seen.

We went forward then, to rest for fully an hour in the cavern close now to the barrier, for the darkness fell swiftly into the ravine, rolling, as it were, down the mountain-sides; and then, with beating hearts, we prepared to start, our course being along the little valley to the entrance, and then, according to my uncle's plans, as nearly south-east as we could travel until we could hit upon a stream.

The time for starting at length came, and after a little further consultation Garcia was once more carefully secured and laid upon his back in the mouth of the cave, that being the only plan we could adopt; and then, panting with excitement, each man with all his weapons ready for immediate action, we started in single file and began to move down the ravine.

The darkness was intense, and but for the sagacity of the leading mule our progress would have been slow indeed; but the patient brute went on at a quiet, regular pace, and his fellows followed, the breathing of the animals and the slight rustle through the herbage being all that smote the ear.

I should think that we had gone about a quarter of a mile, straining our eyes to catch sight of an enemy on either side as we made our way through what was like a

dense bank of darkness, when, loud and clear upon the night air, rang out a wild, strange cry, which made us instinctively stop to listen.

Twice more it rang out, evidently distant, but still plainly heard as it echoed along the ravine.

"It is some beast of prey, but it will not come near us," said my uncle, to encourage Mrs. Landell.

"Harry, what is it?" whispered Lilla.

Her soft arm was passed round my neck as she clung, trembling, to me, unable to master her agitation.

"We must push on," I said.

Once more the mules were in motion when the cry rang out again, louder and clearer this time.

I did not answer Lilla's question, for I thought it better not; but I had my own thoughts upon the subject, and I was wondering whether my uncle suspected the meaning of the cry, when I was startled by a voice which seemed to rise out of the darkness.

"Mas'r Harry—Mas'r Harry! I shall never forgive myself. Only to think of me being the one as tied the last knot, and then never to think of gagging him. He'll be there shouting till he brings down all the Indians within twenty miles. Let's make haste, for I sha'n't breathe till we get out of this great long furrer here."

The darkness was still so thick that we could hardly see the bushes against which we brushed, while even when passing beneath dense masses of foliage there seemed to be no difference. A hundred enemies might have been right in front of us, and we should have walked right into their midst.

It was a daring adventure; but it was only by keeping on that we could hope to escape, and if the black dark-

ness did not prove our friend until we were clear of the ravine, I felt that we could hardly hope to get away.

The cries still continued at intervals; but now every cry only seemed to nerve us to greater exertion, and at last they sounded but faintly, as, under the impression that we were now past the entrance to the rift, I was about to tell Tom to try and bear off to the right, if the undergrowth would allow. We had all drawn up, and the mules were reaching down their heads, tempted by the dewy grass, when Tom gave a warning whisper; and directly after, just to our left, came the sound of bodies moving through the bushes, coming nearer and nearer, till about abreast, when they turned off again, and seemed to be proceeding up the ravine towards the cavern.

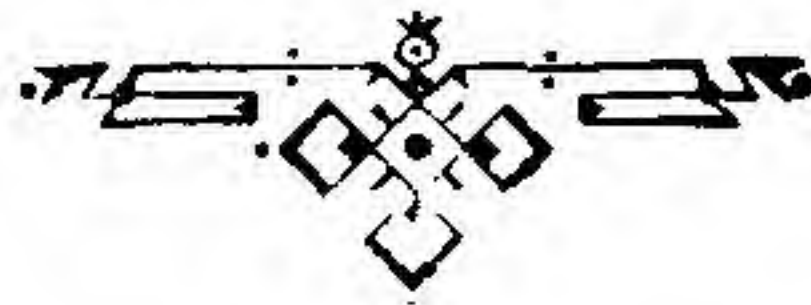
It was a painful five minutes as we stood there, trembling lest one of the mules should shake buckle or strap; for no one there, on afterwards comparing notes, had a doubt as to the cause of the sounds. It was evidently a body of some half dozen men making their way as fast as the darkness would allow, and it was not until all was once more quiet that we could again breathe freely, and continue our journey as swiftly as we could pass through the trees.

We had no difficulty in journeying to the right, and it soon became evident that we were out of the rift; but I had very little hope of our being able to continue in a straight line, seeking the direction where we expected to find a river.

Our progress was necessarily slow, but every half mile, we all felt, was that distance nearer to safety. I was hopeful, too, about our trail; the dew fell heavily, and that and the elastic nature of the growth through which

we passed, would, I thought, possibly conceal our track from those who might try to follow it.

And so we journeyed on through that thick darkness, till the first gray dawn of day found us still hurrying through the dripping foliage, heavy everywhere with the moisture deposited during the night.





CHAPTER XLVII.

ON THE RIVER'S BRINK.

“**N**OW we can see what we're about, Mas'r Harry,” said Tom cheerfully. “Look, there's the first peep of where the sun's coming, and if we'd been boxing the compass all night we couldn't have been trundling more south-easter than we are. Hooroar, Miss Lilla, keep up your sperrits, and we shall soon be all right.”

Lilla smiled a response, and, cheered by the bright day, we made good progress during the next two hours before the mules began to flag, when, letting them graze, we made a short and hasty meal ourselves, each eye scanning the forest round for enemies, such as we knew might spring up at any moment.

An hour's rest taken of necessity, and then we were once more journeying on, hopeful that we might soon strike upon one of the tributaries of the great stream fed by the eternal snow of the mountains; but hours went by, and no sign of river appeared, till suddenly, Tom, who was in advance, said softly:

“Here's water somewhere, not far off, Mas'r Landell, for my mule's cocking his nose up, and sniffing at a fine rate.”

There was no doubt of its being the case, for no sooner

had Tom's beast given evidence of its power of scent, than similar manifestations followed from the others; and now, instead of flagging and labouring along, the hot and wearied beasts broke into a trot, and had to be restrained as they tugged at the bridles.

The character of the undergrowth now, too, began to indicate moisture, and that floods sometimes swept along the low flat jungle, where we with some difficulty forced our way; and at last, almost overcome by the heat and excitement, we came suddenly upon one of the broad sluggish streams that intersect the vast forest lands, and go to form the vast water system of the Orinoco. The stream, in spite of its sombre current and the desolation of its muddy banks, whispered to us hope and escape from the pursuit that might be now even pressing upon our heels.

My uncle and I hurried forward to scan the bank, ready to shoot at any noxious reptile that might show fight. But we were not called upon to fire; for though a couple of large crocodiles scuttled off into the water, and once or twice there was a sharp rustling amongst the reeds, we were unmolested; and bringing forward our weaker companions, we made a temporary halt.

Now it is quite possible that, had I been a naturalist, I might have called the horrible reptiles that abounded in these muddy streams by some other name than crocodile; but even now, after consulting various authorities, I am not quite satisfied as to the proper term. The English of the district always called them crocodiles, and to me they certainly seemed to differ from the alligator or cayman, whose acquaintance I afterwards made amongst the lagoons of the Southern United States.

But to return to our position on the river bank.

We knew that there was no time to be lost; and having cut a few stout bamboos, we inflated the four skins we had, but not without some difficulty, as they required soaking, and the tying up of one or two failing places.

Our little raft was at length made, and, provided with a couple of poles, afforded easy means of escape for three—at a pinch for four.

And now came the arrangements for the gold.

It seemed cruel, but, situated as we were, what else could we do? I did not like the plan, but could see no alternative; so with Tom's aid the mules were unloaded, and we led the poor brutes into the leafy screen, so that Lilla and her mother might not be witnesses of how they were to be offered up for our safety.

For our plan was this—to slay the poor beasts, and with their inflated skins to try and make a raft that should bear Tom, myself, and the gold.

My heart failed me as the faithful brutes, that had brought us thus far, turned their great soft eyes up to mine, and for a few minutes I hesitated, trying to think out some other plan for our escape, when a warning cry from my uncle brought Tom and myself back to the river bank, where we could see, half a mile higher up the stream, a couple of canoes, each containing two Indians, who were lazily paddling down towards where we were.

At first we took them for enemies, and gave ourselves up for lost; and I was about to beg of my uncle to risk flight with Lilla and my aunt upon the little raft, while I and Tom covered their escape with our guns; but the distance being lessened each moment, we could make out that these men belonged to one of the inoffensive fishing

tribes who lived upon the rivers and their banks; and a new thought struck me—one which I directly communicated to my uncle.

“Keep strict guard,” I then said, “and mind this—a loud whistle shall bring us directly back to your help. Come, Tom—bring your gun, man!”

The next minute Tom and I were upon the raft, dragging ourselves slowly upstream by means of the bushes that overhung the river, till we found that the Indians could see our coming, when we began to paddle the best way we could out towards the middle.

As I expected, the Indians first stopped, and then made as if to turn round and flee, raising their paddles for a fierce dash, when—

“Now, Tom!” I exclaimed; and, standing up together, we presented our guns as if about to fire.

“Ah! they’re like the crows at home,” muttered Tom; “they know what a gun is.”

Tom was right; for the poor fellows uttered a wail of misery, held up their paddles, and then suffered their canoes to drift helplessly towards us.

“Quick, Tom!” I now exclaimed; “lay down your gun; and try and fight against this stream, or we shall lose them after all.”

Tom seized the bamboo pole, and by rapid beating of the water contrived to keep the raft stationary till the Indians were nearly abreast, when, pointing to the bank from which we had come, and still menacing them with my gun, I made the poor timid creatures slowly precede us, and tow us as well, to where my uncle was anxiously watching.

Upon landing, the poor fellows crouched before us, and

laid their foreheads upon the muddy grass; when, after trying to reassure them, my uncle, who knew a little of their barbarous tongue, explained that we only wanted their canoes; when, overjoyed at escaping with their lives, the poor abject creatures eagerly forced the paddles into our hands.

"Tell them, Uncle, that we don't want their fishing-gear," I said; when there was a fresh demonstration of joy, and Tom threw out their rough lines and nets on to the grass.

"They may as well help us load, Mas'r Harry, mayn't they?" said Tom—a proposition I at once agreed to.

In a very short space of time the gold was all placed in one canoe while we tethered the other by a short rope to the raft: this boat contained the provisions and ammunition, and in this Tom and I were to go, towing the gold canoe and the raft, upon which more convenient place my uncle, armed and watchful while we paddled, was to sit with Lilla and my aunt.

It was nearly dark when our arrangements were at an end; and thankful that, so far, we had been uninterrupted, I drew the raft close in, secured it to our canoe, and Tom took his place, paddle in hand. My uncle made a couple of good easy seats for Lilla and my aunt, and then took his place beside them; and now nothing was wanted but for me to take a paddle beside Tom, when he exclaimed:

"This here stuff makes the canoe all hang to the stern, Mas'r Harry. Tell you what, I'll go in that canoe for the present, and get the freight shifted, and then join you again."

I nodded acquiescence, and then turned to the poor

miserable creatures whom we seemed to be robbing, and who now stood, dejected of aspect, watching us.

“What shall I give them?” I thought. “A gun—a knife or two? Pish! how absurd! Here—here!” I exclaimed, catching the two nearest savages by the hand and hastily drawing them into the brake, when the others followed. “One apiece for you, my good fellows, and you gain by the exchange.”

They could not understand my word; but as I pointed to the animals tethered in the gloom, and then placed the bridle of a mule in each of the four men’s hands, their joy seemed unbounded, and, with a nod and a smile, I was turning to depart, eager to continue our flight, when a wild cry from the raft seemed to fix me to the spot.





CHAPTER XLVIII.

IN THE DARK.

THE cry was repeated twice before I could make a dash through the thick swampy growth towards the bank.

“Quick—quick, Harry! They are here!”

“Mas’r Harry!” cried Tom in a piteous voice.

The next moment I was on the trampled bank a little below where we had landed, to see in a moment that the little raft was being pushed off; for in cat-like silence our enemies had approached us, and I bitterly repented that I had not joined Tom, instead of wasting time over the fishers whose canoes we had taken. I knew that not a moment had been wasted, and that it would have been impossible to have half-made another raft by this time; but the means of safety had been open to me, and, so as to be fair, I had slighted it; while now I was in despair.

Those were terrible moments! As I emerged from the brake there arose a fierce yell; there was a scattered volley, and the flashes gave me a momentary glimpse of the pale face of Lilla upon the raft. Then there was the loud splashing of the water, and the hurrying to and fro of dimly seen figures—for the darkness was now deepening with that rapidity only known in equatorial regions.

A moment after, I heard the splashing of water, as of some one swimming; and feeling that it was my only chance, I prepared to dash into the muddy current, when there was a crash, a hoarse cry, and a heavy body struck me on the back, driving me down upon my hands and knees, a tight clutch was upon my throat, and I felt that I was a prisoner, when, with a despairing effort for liberty, I threw myself sideways towards the river, rolled over in the mud, and then my adversary and I were beneath the water.

We rose directly, and I felt that I was free; for, with a guttural cry, my foe loosened his hold and made for the bank, while, blinded and confused, I swam desperately in the direction I thought might have been taken by the raft.

I almost dashed through the water for a few minutes, as I tried to put in force every feint I knew in swimming; while, as I made the current foam around, I could hear the noise of struggling, muttered imprecations, and then a low, panting breathing, and then once more there was silence.

I began to feel that I had made my last effort, and I was nerving myself for another stroke when my hand touched something hard.

"Loose your hold or I fire!" cried a fierce voice, and the barrel of a gun was pressed against my cheek.

"Uncle!" I gasped, in a voice that did not sound like mine, and as I spoke I grasped the cold barrel of the gun.

There was a loud ejaculation, a faint cry, hands were holding mine, I could feel the raft rocking to and fro, as if about to be overturned; and then, as I felt that I was drawn upon it—that I was saved—my senses reeled, and

my mind became dark as the sky which hung over the river.

I believe my swoon did not last many minutes. How could it, when my head was being held to my aunt's breast, which heaved with emotion, and hot tears were falling upon my forehead.

"Lilla?" I whispered.

"Harry!" was breathed upon my cheek, as she came forward.

But this was no time for talking, and rallying my strength I rose to my knees.

"I thought I should never have reached you, Uncle," I said.

"I did my best, Harry," he whispered; "but I felt that when those blood-hounds leaped suddenly out from the brake that I must push off."

"But what was that struggle I heard? Did I not hear Garcia's voice?"

"Yes," said my uncle, huskily.

"And where is Tom?"

My uncle was silent.

"Poor Tom?" I said, in an inquiring voice.

"Yes," said my uncle, huskily. "It seemed to me that Garcia and another reached the canoe Tom was in—the gold canoe, Harry—and that then there was a desperate fight, which lasted some minutes. I had seized the paddle, and tried to make for where the struggle seemed to be going on; but first there was a faint, gurgling cry, and then utter silence; and though I softly paddled here and there I could find nothing. Harry, that canoe was heavily laden—the gold was a dead weight—"

"And it took down with it what was worth ten thou-

sand times more than the vile yellow trash," I cried bitterly—"as true a heart as ever beat. Oh, Uncle—Uncle! I have murdered as noble a man as ever breathed, and as faithful a friend. Oh, Tom—Tom!" I groaned.

I could say no more; but out there that night on the breast of the black, swift stream, with not a sound now but the sobs of the women to break the terrible silence, I—a woman myself now in heart—bent down to cover my face with my hands and cry like a child.

At last I grew more calm, for there was work to be done. I found that we had floated on to a kind of mud bank, and were aground, and I had to help my uncle to get the raft off, which we managed by drawing the canoe up alongside, and then getting in and paddling hard, with the effect that the raft at last floated off, and we retained our places in the canoe guiding the raft down the swiftly flowing stream.

Morning at last, to bring no brightness to my heart.

We paddled on, the little raft, buoyant as possible, following swiftly in our wake.

"Harry," said my uncle, almost sternly, "I have thought it over during the darkness of the night, and I cannot feel that we have been wanting in any way. Poor lad! it was his fate."

"Uncle," I cried, throwing down my paddle, "I can bear this no longer. I must go back!"

"Harry," cried my uncle, "you shall not act in that mad fashion. You have escaped with life, and now you would throw it away."

"Is it not mine to cast away if I like?" I said bitterly.

"No," he said in a low tone, as he bent forward and whispered something in my ear.

"Say no more, Uncle—pray say no more," I groaned. "Indeed, I believe that I am half mad. I would almost sooner have died myself than that this should have happened. How can I ever face those at home?"

"Harry, my lad," said my uncle, "take up your paddle, and use it. You are thinking of the future—duty says that you must think now of the present. We have two lives to save; and, until we have them in one of the settled towns, our work is not done."

I took up my paddle in silence, and plunged the blade in the stream, and we went on, swiftly and silently, along reach after reach of the river.

Many hours passed without an alarm, and then, just as we were passing into another and a wider river, there came from the jungly edge of the left bank a puff of smoke, and a bullet struck the canoe.

"To the right," whispered my uncle softly; "we shall soon be out of that."

The paddles being swiftly plied, we made for the opposite bank, striving hard to place those we had with us out of reach of harm. But with bullets flying after us our efforts seemed very slow, and the raft was struck twice, and the water splashed over us several times, before I felt a sharp blow on my shoulder—one which half numbed me—while a bullet fell down into the bottom of the canoe.

"Spent shot, Harry," said my uncle, striking on alternate sides with his paddle, for I was helpless for the next quarter of an hour. "There will be no wound, only a little pain."

The skin raft held together well—light and buoyant—so that our progress down stream was swift, but appa-

rently endless, day after day, till our provisions were quite exhausted, and our guns had to be called into requisition to supply us with food.

We were suffering too much to appreciate the wonders of the region through which we were passing; but I have since then often recalled it here at home in the quiet safety of my chair by my fireside, wondering often too how it was that we managed ever to get down to a civilized town in safety.

There was, of course, always the consciousness of knowing that, if we kept afloat, sooner or later we must reach the sea; but what an interminable way it was! At one time we were slowly gliding down a wide river whose banks were not only covered to the water's edge with the dense growth of the primeval forest, but the huge branches of the great trees spread far over the muddy flood. These trees were woven together, as it were, by the huge cable-like lianas which ran from tree to tree. From others hung the draperies of Spanish moss, while others were clothed with flowers from the water's edge to the very summits, whose sweet blooms filled the air with their spicy odours. This wondrous wall of verdure rose to a great height; and when the current sometimes swept us near what was really a shoreless shore great herons would sometimes take flight, or a troop of monkeys rush chattering up amongst the leafy branches, going along hand over hand with the most astonishing velocity, or making bounds that I would think must end in their falling headlong into the river. But no, they never seemed to miss the branch that was their aim, and this, too, when often enough one of these agile little creatures would be a mother with a couple of tiny young ones clinging so

tightly to her neck that the three bodies seemed to be only one.

Curious little creatures these monkeys were, but as a rule exceedingly shy. Sometimes on a hot mid-day I would be seated listlessly, paddle in hand, dipping it now and then to avoid some mass of tangled driftwood, and then watching the great wall of verdure, I would see the leaves shake a little and then all would be still; but if I watched attentively as we glided by, it was a great chance if I did not see some little, dark, hairy face gazing intently down at me with the sharp, eager eyes scanning my every movement, and if I raised a hand the little face was gone like magic, a rustling leaf or waving strand of some convolvulus-like plant being all that was left to show where the little creature had been.

At other times, instead of the winding river with its walls of verdure, we passed into what seemed to be some vast island-studded lake, some being patches of considerable extent, others mere islets of a dozen yards across, but all covered with trees and tangled with undergrowth. Landing on any of these was quite impossible unless through one of the verdant tunnels in which now and then there would be a swirl of the water that formed their bottom, showing where some huge reptile had dived at the sight of our boat and raft; while at other times a great snout, with the two eminences above its eyes, would be thrust out of the water and then slowly subside, to be seen no more.

At these times the current swept us through winding channels in and out among the islands, and if I could have felt in better spirits I should have found endless pleasure in investigating the various beauties of the vege-

table world: the great trumpet-shaped flowers that hung from some of the vines, with endless little flitting and poising gems of humming-birds feeding upon the nectar within the blossoms. Then squirrels could be seen running from branch to branch, at times boldly in sight, at others timid as the other occupants of the tree, the palm-cats, that were almost as active.

Once I caught sight of the spots of a jaguar as the agile beast crept along a branch in its hunt for food, the object of its aim being a group of little chattering and squealing monkeys which were feasting on the berries of a leafy tree.

Lilla shuddered on one occasion as I pointed out the long, twiny body of a large boa which was sluggishly making its way through the dense foliage of an india-rubber tree, apparently to get in a good position where it could secure itself in ambush, ready for striking at any bird that might come within its reach.

As it happened the current drove us right in close to the tree and beneath some of its overhanging branches, with the result that the creature ceased its slow gliding movement through the dense leafage, and raised its head and four or five feet of its neck, swaying it slowly to and fro as if hesitating whether or no to make a dart at us.

It was by no means a pleasant moment, and I felt for the time something of the sensation that I had so often read of as suffered by people who have been fascinated by snakes. I had a gun lying close by me, but I made no movement to reach it; and though I had a paddle in my hand I believe that, if the creature had lowered its head, I should not have struck at it. In short, I could do nothing

but gaze at that waving, swaying head, with the glistening eyes, and the beautiful yellow and brown tortoise-shell-like markings of the neck and body.

Then the stream swept us slowly away, and we were beyond the reptile's reach.

Taking the recollection of these wild creatures of the South American forests, though, altogether, there was not so much cause for fear. As a rule every noxious beast seemed to aim at but one thing, and that was to escape from man. Even the great alligators, unless they could find him at a disadvantage in their native element, would rush off through the mud and undergrowth to plunge into the water and seek safety right at the bottom of the river. The jaguars were timid in the extreme; and though they would have fought perhaps if driven to bay, their one idea seemed to be to seek safety in flight. It was the same with the poisonous serpents, the most dangerous being a kind of miniature rattlesnake which was too sluggish and indifferent to get out of the traveller's way, and many a poor fellow suffered from their deadly bite.

In fact the most dangerous and troublesome creatures we had to encounter on our journey down the river, excepting man, were the mosquitoes—which swarmed all along the river borders and pestered us with their bites—and an exceedingly small fish that seemed to be in myriads in parts of the stream, and to make up in absolute ferocity for their want of size. This savageness of nature was of course but their natural instinctive desire for food, but it was dangerous in the extreme, as I knew later on. Our experience was in this wise:—

It was one lovely afternoon when we were floating dreamily along between two of the most beautiful walls

of verdure that we had seen. Many of the trees were gorgeous with blossoms, the consequence being that bright-winged beetles, painted butterflies, and humming-birds abounded.

My uncle was seated half asleep with the heat, and his gun across his knees, waiting for an opportunity to shoot some large bird that would be good for food; I was dipping in my paddle from time to time so as to keep the canoe's head straight and away from the awkward snags that projected from the river here and there—the remains of trees that had been washed out of the bank by some flood—and I was thinking despondently about the loss of poor Tom.

Then my thoughts reverted to home and those I had to meet there, with our accounts of how it was that poor Tom had met his death.

“All due to my miserable ambition,” I said to myself; “all owing to my wretched thirst for gold. And what has it all come to?” I said bitterly. “I had far better have settled down to honest, straightforward labour. I should have been better off.”

I gave the paddle a few dips here, and noted that the water was much purer and clearer than it had seemed yet. We were very close in to the shore, but we had floated down so far that we had ceased to fear the Indians, believing as we did that they were now far behind.

Then I began to think once more of how much better off I should have been if I had settled down to work on my uncle's plantation.

Not much, I was obliged to own, for my settling down would not have saved me from quarrelling with Garcia,

neither would it have cleared my uncle from the incumbrance upon his home.

"Perhaps things are best as they are," I said; and then I looked back to where Lilla was thoughtfully gazing down into the river from where she reclined upon the raft, and letting one of her hands hang down in the water, which she played with and splashed from time to time.

I was just going to warn her not to do so, for I remembered having read or heard tell that alligators would sometimes make a snap at a hand dragging in the water like that, when she uttered a sharp cry, snatching her hand away; and as she did so I saw a little flash, as if a tiny, silvery fish, dropped back into the water.

"What is it?" I said.

"Something bit me—a little fish," she said. "It has nipped a morsel out of my finger."

She held up her hand as she spoke before wrapping a scrap of linen round it, and I could see that it was bleeding freely.

"Surely it could not have been that tiny fish," I said, thrusting one hand into the water and snatching it back again, for as it passed beneath the surface it was as if it had been pinched in half a dozen places at once; and when I thrust it in again I could see that the water was alive with little fish apparently about a couple of inches long, and instantaneously they made a rush at my hand, fastening upon it everywhere, so that it needed a sharp shake to throw them off; and when I drew it out, hardened and tough as it was with my late rough work, it was bleeding in a dozen places.

"Why, the little wretches!" I exclaimed; and by way

of experiment I held a piece of leather over the side, to find that it was attacked furiously; while even later on, when I had been fishing and had caught a small kind of mud-carp, I hauled it behind the canoe, in a few minutes there was nothing left but the head—the little ravenous creatures having literally devoured it all but the stronger bones.

I remember thinking how unpleasant it would be to bathe there, and often and often afterwards we found that it would be absolutely impossible to dip our hands beneath the water unless we wished to withdraw them smarting and covered with blood.

What more these little creatures could effect we had yet to learn, but we owned that they were as powerful in the water as the fiercer kind of ants on land, where they were virulent enough in places to master even the larger kinds of snakes if they could find them in a semi-torpid state after a meal—biting with such virulence and in such myriads that the most powerful creatures at last succumbed.

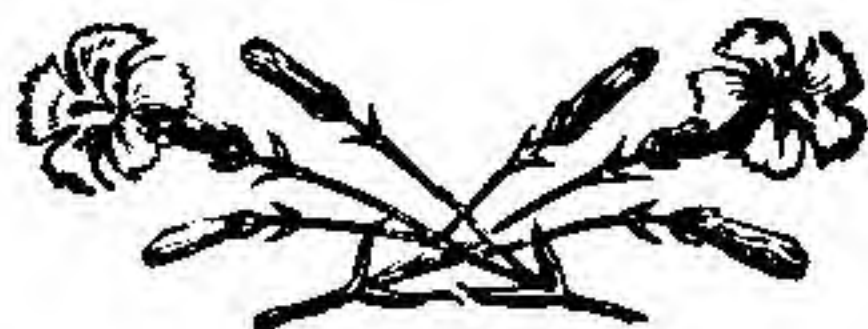
At last, as the days glided on, we became more and more silent. Very little was said, and only once did my uncle talk to me quietly about our future, saying that we must get to one of the settlements on the Orinoco, low down near its mouth, and then see what could be done.

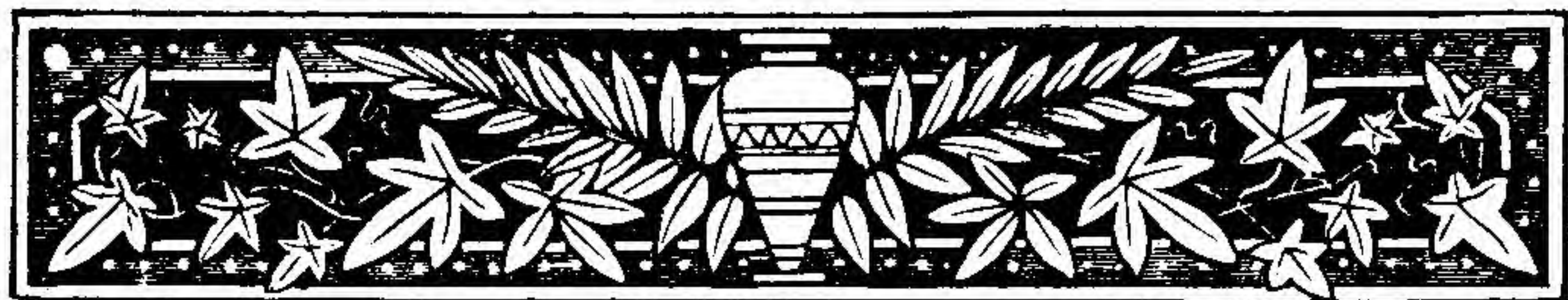
A deep, settled melancholy seemed to have affected us all; but the sight, after many days, of a small trading-boat seemed to inspire us with hopefulness; and having, in exchange for a gun, obtained a fair quantity of provisions, we continued our journey with lightened spirits.

In spite, though, of seeing now and then a trading-boat, we got at last into a very dull and dreamy state;

while, as is usually the case, the weakest, and the one from whom you might expect the least, proved to have the stoutest heart. I allude, of course, to Lilla, who always tried to cheer us on.

But there was a change coming—one which we little expected—just as, after what seemed to be an endless journey, we came in sight of a town which afterwards proved to be Angostura.





CHAPTER XLIX.

HOW TOM SAVED THE TREASURE.

IT was the afternoon of a glorious day, and we were floating along in the broiling heat, now and then giving a dip with the paddles, so as to direct the canoe more towards the bank, where we could see houses. There was a boat here and a boat there, moored in the current; and now and then we passed a canoe, while others seemed to be going in the same direction as ourselves.

“Harry, look there!” cried my uncle.

I looked in the direction pointed out ahead, shading my eyes with my hand, when I dropped my paddle, as I rose up, trembling, in the boat; for just at that moment, from a canoe being paddled towards us, there came a faint but unmistakable English cheer—one to which I could not respond for the choking feelings in my throat.

I rubbed my eyes, fancying that I must have been deceived, as the canoe came nearer and nearer, but still slowly, till it grated against ours, and my hands were held fast by those of honest old Tom, who was laughing, crying, and talking all in a breath.

“And I’ve been thinking I was left behind, Mas’r

Harry, and working away to catch you; while all the time I've been paddling away."

"Tom!—Tom!" I cried huskily, "we thought you dead!"

"But I ain't—not a bit of it, Mas'r Harry. I'm as live as ever. But ain't you going to ask arter anything else?"

"Tom, you're alive," I said, in the thankfulness of my heart, "and that is enough."

"No, 'tain't, Mas'r Harry," he whispered rather faintly; for now I saw that he looked pale and exhausted. "No, 'tain't enough; for I've got all the stuff in the bottom here, just as we packed it in. Ain't you going to say 'hooray!' for that, Mas'r Harry?" he cried, in rather disappointed tones.

"Tom," I said, "life's worth a deal more than gold." And then I turned from him, for I could say no more.

We pushed in now to the landing-place, with a feeling of awakened confidence, given—though I did not think of it then—by the knowledge of our wealth; and leaving Tom in charge of the canoes, we sought the first shelter we could obtain, and leaving there my uncle to watch over the safety of the women, I set about making inquiries, and was exceedingly fortunate in obtaining possession of a house that was falling to ruin, having been lying deserted since quitted by an English merchant a couple of years before. A few inquiries, too, led us to the discovery that there was an English vice-consul resident, to whom I told so much of our story as was safe, mentioning the attack upon my uncle, and speaking of myself as having merely been upon an exploring visit.

The result was a number of pleasant little attentions,

the consul sending up his servants to assist in making the house habitable, and sending to buy for us such articles of furniture as would be necessary for our immediate wants.

I took the first opportunity of impressing upon all present secrecy respecting the treasure, for I could not tell in what light our possession of it might be looked upon; and then I hurried down to the canoes to Tom with refreshments, of which he eagerly partook, as he said at intervals:

“I believe I should have been starved out, Mas’r Harry, if there hadn’t been some of the eatables stuffed in my canoe by mistake; for I’d got nothing much to swop with the Indians when I did happen to see any ashore.”

It was then arranged that he should still stay with the boats till I could return and tell him that I had a safe place, while as Tom lazily stretched himself over the packages in the canoe, sheltering his head with a few great leaves, his appearance excited no attention, and I left him without much anxiety, to return to my uncle.

The discovery that Tom existed had robbed our perils of three parts of their suffering; and now, with feelings of real anxiety respecting the treasure springing up, I hurried back again to the landing-place, to find all well, for the place was too Spanish and lazy for our coming to create much excitement.

“Say, Mas’r Harry,” cried Tom, grinning hugely, in spite of his pale face and exhaustion, “I’ve got you now. I said you was to let me have a pound a week; I must go in for thirty bob after this. Come, now, no shirking. Say yes, or I’m hanged if I don’t scuttle the canoe.”

It was evident, though, that Tom had undergone a great

deal, and was far from able to bear much more; for that evening, after telling the Indian porters that I was a sort of curiosity and stone collector, and getting the treasure carried up safely to the house which I had taken, he suddenly gave a lurch, and would have fallen had I not caught his arm.

"Why, Tom!" I cried anxiously.

"I think, Mas'r Harry," he said softly, "it might be as well if you was to let a doctor look at me—it would be just as well. I've a bullet in me somewhere, and that knife—"

"Bullet—knife, Tom?"

"Yes, Mas'r Harry, that Garcia—but I'll tell you all about it after."

The doctor I hastily summoned looked serious as he examined Tom's hurts; and though, with insular pride, I rather looked down upon Spanish doctors, this gentleman soon proved himself of no mean skill in surgery, and under his care Tom rapidly approached convalescence.

"You see, Mas'r Harry, it was after this fashion," said Tom one evening as I sat by his bedside indulging in a cup of coffee, just when one of the afternoon rains had cooled the earth, and the air that was wafted through the open window was delicious. "You see it was after this fashion—"

"But are you strong enough to talk about it, Tom?" I said anxiously.

"Strong, Mas'r Harry! I could get a toller cask down out of a van. Well, it was like this: I was, as you know, in the gold canoe; and being on my knees, I was leaning over the side expecting you to swim off to me, and at last, as I thought, there you was, when I held out my hands

and got hold of one of yours and the barrel of a gun with the other, when a thought struck me—

“ ‘Why, surely Mas’r Harry hadn’t his gun with him?’

“But it was no time, I thought, for bothering about trifles, with the night black as ink, and the Indians collected together upon the bank; so I did the best I could to help you, and the next minute there you was in the gold canoe, and not without nearly oversetting it, heavy-laden as she was—when I whispers, ‘You’d best take a paddle here, Mas’r Harry,’ when I felt two hands at my throat, my head bent back, a knee forced into my chest, and there in that black darkness I lay for a few minutes quite stupid, calling myself all the fools I could think of for helping someone on board that I knew now was not you.

“That was rather ticklish work, being choked as I was, Mas’r Harry,” said Tom, with his pale face flushing up, and his eyes brightening with the recollection; “but above all things, I couldn’t help feeling then that, if I did get a prick with a knife, I deserved it for being such a donkey. Then I got thinking about Sally Smith, and wishing that we had parted better friends; then about you and Miss Lilla, and about how all the gold would be lost; and then I turned savage, and seemed to see blood, as I made up my mind that, if you didn’t have the treasure, the Don shouldn’t, for I’d upset the canoe and sink it all first for the crockydiles.

“I don’t know what I said, and I don’t much recollect what I did, only that for ever so long there was a reg’lar struggle going on, which made that little canoe rock so that I expected every moment it would be upset; but I s’pose we both meant that it shouldn’t; and at last

we were lying quite still on the gold, with all round us black and quiet as my lord's vault in the old churchyard at home. Garcia had got tight hold of my hands, and I kept him by that means so that he couldn't use his sting—I mean his knife—you know, Mas'r Harry.

“It seemed to me at last that my best plan was to lie still and wait till he give me a chance; for after one or two struggles I only found that I was nowhere, and ever so much weaker; so I did lie still, waiting for a chance, and wondering that Mas'r Landell didn't come and lend me a hand.

“All at once there came a horrible thought to me, and that was—ah! there were two horrible thoughts—that you had missed the canoe and had gone down, and that the raft had broke away from the gold canoe while we were jerking and rocking about, and that I was left alone here on this big river, with the Don waiting for a chance to send that knife of his through me.

“Now, you needn't go thinking it was because I cared anything about you, Mas'r Harry,” continued Tom in a sulky voice, “for it wasn't that: it was only just because I was a weak great booby, and got a wondering what your poor mother would say when I got home, and then, I couldn't help it, if I didn't get crying away like a great girl kep' in at school, for I don't know how long, and the canoe gliding away all the time on the river.

“Getting rid of all that warm water made me less soft; and when Mas'r Garcia got struggling again I give him two or three such wipes on the head as must have wound him up a bit; and then, after nearly having the boat over again, there we lay for hour after hour in the thick darkness, getting stiff as stiff, as we kep' one another from

doing mischief. And then at last came the light, with the fog hanging over the river, thick as the old washus at home when Sally Smith took off the copper-lid and got stirring up the clothes. Then the sun came cutting through the mist, chopping it up like golden wires through a cake of soap. There was the green stuff like a hedge on both sides of the river, the parrots a-screaming, the crockydiles crawling on to the mud-banks or floating down, the birds a-fishing, and all looking as bright as could be, while my heart was black as a furnace-hole, Mas'r Harry, and that black-looking Don was close aside me.

"I ain't of a murderous disposition, Mas'r Harry, but I felt very nasty then, in that bright, clear morning, though all the time I was thinking what a nice place this world would be if it wasn't for wild beasts, and men as makes themselves worse; for there was that Don's eye saying as plain as could be:

"'There ain't room enough in this here canoe for both of us, young man!'

"'Then it's you as must go out of it, Don Spaniard,' says my eyes.

"'No; it's you as must go out of it, you beggarly little soap-boiling Englishman,' says his eyes.

"'It's my Mas'r Harry's gold, and if he's gone to the crockydiles I'll save the treasure for his Miss Lilla and the old folks—so now, then!' says my eyes.

"And all this, you know, was without a word being spoke; when all at once if he didn't make a sort of a jump, and before I knew where we were he was at one end of the canoe and I was at the other.

'Well, you may say that was a good thing. But it

wasn't; for as I scrambled up there he was with both guns at his end, and me with nothing but my fisties.

"I saw through his dodge now, but it was too late; and in the next few moments I thought three things:

" 'Shall I sit still like a man and let him shoot me?'

" 'Shall I rock the canoe over and let it sink?'

" 'Shall I go at him?'

"I hadn't pluck enough to sit still and be shot, Mas'r Harry, for you know what a cur I always was; and I thought it a pity to sink the canoe in case you, if you were alive, or Mas'r Landell, might come back to look for it. So I made up my mind to the last, being bristly, and, with my monkey up, I dashed at him.

"*Bang!* He got a shot at me, and I felt just as if some one had hit me a blow with a stick hard enough to make me savage; but it didn't stop me a bit, for I reached at him such a crack with my double fist just as he struck his knife into me; and then we were overboard and struggling together in the sunlit water, making it splash up all around.

" 'It's all over with you, Tom!' I said to myself; for as we rose to the surface after our plunge he got one arm free, his knife was lifted, and I looked him full in the face as I felt, though I didn't say it—'You cowardly beggar! why can't you fight like a man with your fists?'

"The next moment he must have struck that knife into me again, when I never see such a horrible change in my life as come over his face—from savage joy to fear—for in a flash he let go the knife, shrieked horribly, and half-forced himself out of the water, leaving me free, when, with a terrible fear on me that the crockydiles were at him, I swum for the canoe; and how, I don't

know, I managed to get in, with hundreds of tiny little fish leaping and darting at me like a shoal of gudgeons, only they nipped pieces out of my hands and feet, which were bare; and if I hadn't been quick they'd have had me to pieces.

"No sooner was I in the canoe than I turned, for Garcia was shrieking horribly in a way that nearly drove me mad to hear him, as he beat, and splashed, and tore about in the water—now down, now up, now fighting this way, now that—wild with fear and despair, for those tiny fish were at him by the thousand; his face and hands were streaming with blood, and I could see that it would be all over with him directly, when, catching up a paddle, I sent the canoe towards him, to pass close by his hand just as he sank.

"To turn and come back was not many moments' work; but he didn't come up where I expected, and I had to paddle back against stream, but again I missed him, and he went down with a yell, Mas'r Harry, that's been buzzing in my ears ever since—wakes me up of a night, it does, and sends me in a cold perspiration as all the scene comes back again.

"I forgot all about his shooting and knifing me; and, Mas'r Harry, as I hope to get back safe to old England I did all I could to save him when he come up again—silent this time! Did I say him? No, it wasn't him, but a horrible, gashly, bleeding mass of flesh and bone, writhing and twisting as the little fish hung to it and leaped at it by thousands, tearing him really to pieces before he once more sank under the stream, which was all red with blood.

"I paddled here and I paddled there, frantically, but

the body didn't come up again; and then, Mas'r Harry, it seemed to me as if a strong pair of hands had taken hold of the canoe and were twisting it round and round, so that the river and the trees on the banks danced before my eyes, making me that giddy that I fell back and lay, I don't know how long.

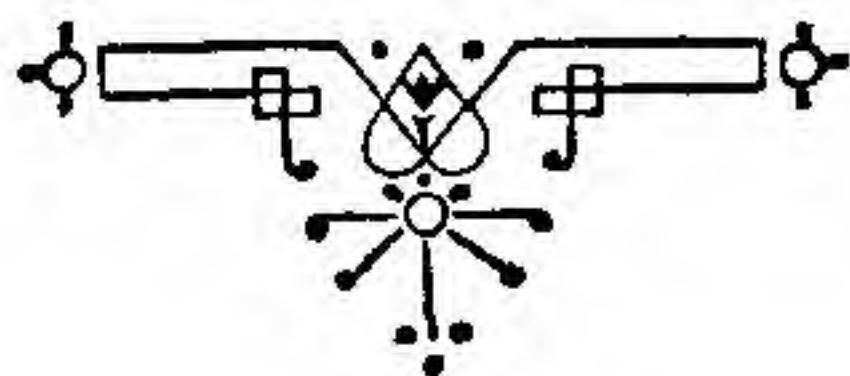
"When I opened my eyes again, Mas'r Harry, I thought I was dying, for there was a horrible sick feeling on me—one which lasted ever so long—till, remembering all about what had taken place, I felt that I had only been fainting; and, raising myself up, I looked on the river for a few minutes, shuddering the while as I tried to leave off thinking about the horrors in it; but try hard as I would, I couldn't help looking—the place having a sort of way for me as if it was pulling me towards it—and I seemed to see all that going on again, though, perhaps, I'd floated down a good mile since it happened.

"At last I dragged my eyes from the water and they fell upon the packages, and they made me think of you, Mas'r Harry; and, in the hope that you were a long way on ahead, I took up a paddle—thinking, too, at the same time, that if you was alive, as soon as you had got Miss Lilla safe you would come back for me."

I did not speak—I could not just then; for in a flood the recollection of the past came upon me, and taking Tom's hands in mine, for a good ten minutes I sat without speaking.

"Well, Mas'r Harry," continued Tom—but speaking now in a thick, husky voice—"I took up the paddle and then I dropped it again, I was that weak, faint, and in pain; and it seemed to me that before I could do anything else I must wash and bind up a bit.

“One of my hands was terribly crippled from my hurt, but I managed to bind a couple of paddles together; and then, rowing slowly on, I was thinking that my labour had been all in vain unless I could manage still to save the gold, when, happening one day to turn round to look up-stream, I saw that, Mas’r Harry, as seemed to give me life, and hope, and strength all in a moment; and you know the rest.”





CHAPTER L.

THE USE OF THE TREASURE.

IT is one thing being possessed of a treasure and another knowing what to do with it. Here was I with the fortune, as my uncle called it, of a prince, found, as I had found it, and to which some people may say I had no right, and I often thought so myself. But on the other hand I felt that I could do more good with it than it would do left there in the bed of that stream—so many relics of a superstition—of a pagan idolatry carried on three hundred years ago. The traditions of its being hidden there had of course been handed down, but it had never been seen since it was buried at the time of the conquest, and all who had a right to it had been dead for ages.

So I comforted myself that I was only the one who had brought it to light, and that it was my duty to put it to as good a purpose as possible, and that I meant to do.

Well, here I had the treasure; but the next thing was, should I be able to keep it?

If the Indians could trace me and dared to come across the river all this distance down and into the civilized region, I knew that my life would not be safe, and that they would have the treasure back at any cost.

But then it was not likely that the simple savages would venture after me even if they could find out where I had come.

Then there were the Spaniards about us. If they knew of the wealth we had in the ordinary house of which we had taken possession they would either get it away by legal means, claiming it as belonging to one or the other government, or else make a regular filibustering descent upon us and secure it by violence, even taking our lives as well.

Secrecy, then, seemed to be the only thing possible; and after a good deal of thinking and planning, my uncle, Tom, and I constructed a little furnace in a corner of the house, after boarding up the window and covering it with blankets as well.

Here we purposed to melt down the treasure into long ingots, which we hoped to mould in sand—little, long, golden bars being the most convenient shape in which we could carry our gold.

I knew even then that it was a great pity to destroy what were equally valuable as curiosities as for their intrinsic worth as precious metal; but any attempt to dispose of them would have meant confiscation, and such a treasure was not to be introduced to the notice of strangers with impunity.

My uncle joined with me in lamenting the difficulties of the case, and that we should be under the necessity of melting the cups and plates down; but he urged me to do it as soon as possible, and we soon set to work, carrying on our metal fusing in secret by the help of a crucible and a great deal of saltpetre, which soon helped to bring the heat to a pitch where the gold would melt like so

much lead, and then by the help of a strong handle the pot was lifted out and its glowing contents poured forth into the moulds.

The ingots we thus cast had to be filed and the rough projections taken off, the dust and scraps being remelted down with the other portion.

It was a tremendous task, though. The plates we managed pretty easily, but the discs had to be cut up first by means of a great hammer and a cold chisel, and the progress we made upon some days was very small.

The cups, too, were very difficult to manage; and Tom and I used to work exceedingly hard, hammering and breaking the gold into small pieces that would go into the melting-pot. Sometimes our fingers were quite sore with the hammering and filing.

Still we kept on making progress, nervous progress, lest people should find out what we were about; and by slow degrees we added ingot to ingot—little, bright, yellow bar after bar—to one heap, and bar after bar of silver to another heap, which were kept buried under a stone in the floor of one of the rooms.

Over and over again we hesitated before breaking up some beautifully-worked cup, though without exception these had been battered and flattened, perhaps three hundred years ago, for the convenience of carriage and hiding from the Spaniards, who had gone west with such a thirst for gold. Several of the best cups were almost flat, the tough, soft metal having evidently been driven in with blows from stones.

We did not get through our task without alarms; for now and then some kindly-disposed person would call, and then we were obliged to hurriedly conceal our work,

smothering the fire, and this perhaps when we were at some particular part of our task. But there was no help for it, as we were compelled to work by daylight for fear of the glow of our furnace-fire taking attention if we attempted anything of the kind by night.

That melting down was like a nightmare to me, and over and over again I used to ask myself whether the gold were worth all this trouble. Slave, slave, slave, till our fingers were sore; and now I would be blistering my hands with a small-toothed saw which Tom had bought one day and brought home in triumph for cutting through the gold, and next time toiling away with a great file.

Yes, it seemed as if we were working ourselves to death for this bright yellow metal; and several times over, without being led up to it by me, Tom quite took my view.

"S'pose this here stuff's going to be very useful, Mas'r Harry," he said.

"Useful, Tom?"

"Ay! I mean I hope it's going to be worth all this work and trouble. My word, Mas'r Harry, soap-boiling's nothing to this!"

"Tired, Tom?" I said.

"Tired, Mas'r Harry? Not I! But I tell you what I am, and that's hot."

"Yes, it is hot work, Tom," I said.

"Ay, Mas'r Harry, that's just what it is, 'specially when you gets ladling out the soup and pouring it into the moulds. Fine rich soup, ain't it?" he said with a grin.

"The richest of the rich, Tom."

"Ah! it is, Mas'r Harry; but it is hot work, and no mistake, and it sets me thinking a deal."

"Well, Tom, what of?" I asked, for we were waiting for the melting.

"'Bout setting up soap-boiling out here, Mas'r Harry," he said, grinning.

"Well, what about it, Tom?"

"'Twouldn't do, Mas'r Harry," said Tom. "First of all, the work would be a deal too hot; second of all, the trade wouldn't pay, 'cause the people look as if they never washed. No, Mas'r Harry, I don't think the folks here are fond of soap."

Two months of hard toil did we spend over that melting down. For first of all, there was the preparation of the furnace; and a very hard task that was, there being such difficulty in getting proper materials. Stone seemed to go first into scales, and then into powder. The bricks we obtained cracked; and it was not until my uncle had mixed up some clay in a peculiar manner, and beaten it up into bricks of a big, rough shape, that we managed to get on. These bricks we built up into the furnace, and then slowly dried by leaving in a small fire; and this we increased till it was hot enough to burn the rough bricks, which, as we increased the fire to a furious pitch, seemed to fuse the whole together into a solid mass.

Then we had our hiding-place to dig out; and all this work had to be done in such a secret way that it used to make me think of Baron Trenck in prison, so careful and watchful were we in all we did.

Industry mastered it all though at last; and, weary as Tom must have been of his job, he began to feel at last that the gold was worth working for.

"I usen't to think so at one time, Mas'r Harry," he said; "but since I've been working away here, melting

of myself away almost as fast as I melted gold, it's seemed to me as if, when I get home, and Sally Smith knows as I'm a gentleman with a large income of two pound a week, she may be a bit more civil like to me."

"Very likely, Tom," I said smiling.

"That's just what I say, Mas'r Harry—very likely; that is, you know, if there's anything more left of me than the ivory."

"Ivory, Tom?" I said, wondering what he meant.

"Yes, Mas'r Harry—the bones, you know. Don't you see, I mean if I ain't melted all away."

Two months, I say, had it taken before the rich metal was all reduced to neat little bars ready for packing up.

Then we had to discuss the question of the size and material of the cases in which we were to carry home our treasure so as not to excite suspicion.

"We must risk suspicion and inquiry too," said my uncle. "Our way now, Harry, is to get the stuff packed up and go straight away."

"I should do it quite openly," said Lilla quietly, "and if inquiries are made you can say that the chests in which it is packed contain gold. No one can be suspicious then. The people will only think that you are very rich, and be the more respectful."

"You are right, Lilla," said my uncle. "We can show our ingots—I mean your ingots, Harry. No one can prove how you came by them."

The result was that we boldly ordered some little cases to be made of the strongest South American oak, and corded together and bound firmly with hoop-iron; and into these, bedding them neatly with the finest sawdust, we packed the little shining bars.



CHAPTER LI.

OUR TROUBLESOME BURDEN.

BY the time we felt that we might very well make a start for home, we found out that though Lilla's advice had seemed so good, it would not do to act upon, and she laughingly owned that she was wrong.

For, feeling the necessity for obtaining a little spare cash in hand, my uncle undertook to dispose of half a dozen of the little bars of gold, and the adventures were such that he came back to me to say that we should have to be very careful.

"It would never do to attempt a passage in a Spanish vessel boldly, my boy. The very sound of the word *gold* seems to fill the people full of suspicion, and the dealer I went to to-day has been questioning me in all sorts of ways. He thinks, evidently, that I have discovered a rich gold mine somewhere, and is boiling with curiosity to know where."

"And you did not tell him, Uncle," I said laughing.

"No, my boy; but seriously, we must not make these people suspicious. We have to pass through their custom-house places if we go in the regular way, and if we attempt that, depend upon it we shall be stopped, and

have to give the fullest of explanations as to where the gold was obtained, before we are allowed to quit the country, even if we are then."

"Depend upon it, Uncle, we should not be allowed to go then. How vexatious!" I ejaculated. "After all this trouble it will be hard if we are stopped now! We will not be," I cried, with a stamp of the foot. "I have succeeded so far, and if I fail it shall not be for want of foresight."

"What do you mean, Harry?" said my uncle, who seemed to be pleased with my energy and determination.

"I mean, Uncle, that if the treasure is lost it shall be through storm and shipwreck, not from the scheming of men. If they know of our rich treasure they will plan to get it away from us. Well, we must scheme harder to save it.

"Here, let's take Tom into consultation," I said after a pause, and Tom was called in. "Here, Tom," I said, "we've got all the gold packed, how are we to get it away?"

"How are you to get it away, Mas'r Harry?" he said, giving his head a rub, not that it itched, but so as to clear his thoughts, I suppose.

"Yes. How are we to get it away?"

"Stick direction cards on, same as we did with the soap boxes at home, and shove it aboard ship."

"To be stopped as something contraband. No, Tom, that won't do. They would want to know what it was."

"Serve them same as we did the Injins," said Tom grinning: "pretend as they are all forsles and stigmy tights, as you called 'em, Mas'r Harry."

"That may do for Indians, but it will never do for people who are civilized. No, Tom, if you cannot give better advice than that, it is of no use."

"That's the best I've got, Mas'r Harry," said Tom. "I never was a good one that way. You tell me what to do and I'll do it. And as for sticking to you—There, Mas'r Landell, sir, haven't I stuck to Mas'r Harry through thick and thin?"

"Most faithfully, Tom."

"Thanky, sir, thanky," cried Tom.

"Yes, yes, Tom, we know all about that," I said. "No one doubts your fidelity, but it is not the question. We want to know what to do about getting the treasure home safely."

"Oh! Ah! Yes, I see," said Tom, as if he had not understood before, and it made me so vexed, what with being hot and nervous and bothered, that I felt as if I should have liked to kick Master Tom.

"I have it," I exclaimed suddenly, and I gave the table a thump.

"He's got it," cried Tom, rubbing his hands. "Mas'r Harry's got it, Mas'r Landell, sir. He's a wunner at hitting out things, he is."

"What is your idea, Harry?"

"It is rather a risky one, sir," I replied; "but it seems to me the only likely one. We must put up with some inconvenience to get our treasure safe. Once we are at a good British port, of course we need not mind, and can do as we please."

"Well," he said, "what do you propose doing?"

"Find out some small vessel going to Jamaica, and arrange with the captain to take us. If we pay him

pretty well he will ask no questions about what our luggage is."

"And you might make him think it was forsles and them what-you-may-call-'em tights. He wouldn't be much cleverer than the Injins," said Tom.

"We'll see about that, Tom," I said, and my uncle having approved of my plan, we began at once to see if we could not set it in force.

It sounded very easy, but when I had to put it in practice I found it extremely difficult, and to be hedged in with prickles of the sharpest kind.

We wanted to go to Jamaica, as being a suitable port for our purpose, and an easy one to obtain passage home in a mail steamer; but though I could find small vessels, schooners, and brigs going everywhere else, there did not seem to be one likely to sail for Kingston; and try how I would, it appeared as if the very fact of our wanting to go otherwise than by the regular mail route made our conduct suspicious.

In fact more than one of the skippers seemed to think so, and as a rule they declined to take us, saying that it would get them into trouble, while in one case, where the captain of a schooner eagerly agreed to take us, merely stipulating to be well paid, the vessel was such a cranky, ill-found affair that I shrank from trusting my aunt and Lilla in such a crazy hull.

"There's a chap out in the river yonder going to sail for New York at the end of the week, Mas'r Harry," said Tom one morning. "I got into conversation with him last night when I was smoking my pipe, and in about half a minute he'd asked me what my name was, where I was born, how many teeth I'd got, why I came here,

what I was going to do next; and when I told him I wanted to go back to England, he hit me over the back and says: 'Case o' dollars, stranger. I'll take you.' He's coming to see you this morning."

About an hour after I saw a tall, thin, yellow-looking man coming up to the house. He had a narrow smooth face, and two very dark eyes that seemed to have been squeezed close up to his nose—a sharp nose—and a very projecting much-pointed chin. His face was as devoid of hair as a baby's, and taking him altogether, if Tom had not told me he was curious, I should have said at once that he was a man who loved to ask questions.

"Mornin', stranger," he said to both Tom and me, and then, with his queer-looking sharp little eyes searching me all over, he went on: "I guess you're the Englishman who wants to get home with all your tots."

"I am," I said. "May I ask your name?"

"Perks," he said sharply. "'Badiah P. Perks, o' New York. What's your'n?"

I told him.

"Hah, yes. I could see you warn't an A-murray-can. I'll take you if you'll pay."

"Oh, I'll pay a reasonable fare for our party," I replied.

"Party, eh? How many?"

"My uncle, his wife and daughter, and us two," I said.

"And that makes five, stranger. Baggage?"

"Yes," I said.

"Let's look."

I hesitated for a moment, and then took him into the room where our neat little chests were packed, one on

the top of the other, with a couple of blankets thrown over them.

"Hah!" said the skipper, trying one of the iron-bound cases. "Precious heavy, mister. What's in 'em?"

"Curiosities," I replied.

"Just so," he said, winking one eye. "I said they was to myself soon as I see the iron bands round 'em. Wal, they'll weigh up pretty smart. You'll have to pay for them."

"Of course," I said; "anything reasonable."

"That's square, mister," he said, scanning the whole place eagerly. "Now, what might bring you out here, eh?"

"I came to see my uncle," I replied, annoyed at the fellow's impertinence, but thinking it better to be civil.

"Did you, though, mister? Find him?"

"Yes, I found him right enough."

"Did you, though? Old man all right?"

"Quite right."

"Didn't stop with him, though?"

"No, we are all going home together."

"Wonder at it when you might stay in A-murray-kay. I say, mister, you know, what's in them chesties?"

He accompanied the question with a wink and a grin, and pointed over his shoulder towards the cases.

"I told you," I replied, "curiosities."

"Are they, though? Wonder what the custom chaps would call 'em when they overhauled them, eh?"

I was silent, for it was evident that the fellow suspected me of a desire to evade the regular authorities of the port.

"Come, mister," he said with a grin, evidently divining

my thoughts, "out with it, come; you want them chesties smuggled off on the quiet, don't you now? Best take 'Badiah P. Perks into confidence, I guess; makes it smooth for all parties."

"If you like to take our party and luggage to New York, Mr. Perks," I said quietly, "I am ready, as my uncle will be ready, to pay you well for the passage. Is it agreed?"

"Luggage, of course, mister; but them there arn't luggage. Curiosities, didn't you say? What's in 'em?"

"That is my affair, Mr. Perks."

"'Badiah P. Perks, please mister. Now, then, is it square and confidence, and 'Badiah P. Perks' friends, or isn't it?"

"I shall place every confidence in the captain of our vessel, Mr. Perks."

"'Badiah P. Perks, mister."

"Mr. Obadiah P. Perks," I said

"Drop that O, stranger. Don't belong. 'Badiah P. Perks, mister."

"Mr. 'Badiah P. Perks," I said.

"And my folks calls me Kyaptin," said the skipper. "Say, it's wonderful how much ignorance there is 'mongst you Englishers. Wal, I won't say I'll take you, stranger, till I've brought one o' these here yellow nigger officers to look over them chesties, and see if there's anything in 'em as is contraband."

I could not help changing colour, and the fellow saw it. He suspected my motives evidently, and with a smile he turned to go, reaching the door slowly and then pausing, as if he expected me to call him back, but as I did not he hesitated.

"Say, mister," he said, "s'pose anny time'll do for me to bring down the yaller nigger chap?"

I was so wroth with the scoundrel and his cool impudence that I took a defiant tone and said shortly:

"Any time you like, Captain Perks."

"'Badiah P. Perks, mister. All right. I won't be long."

"But mind this," I said, "you are doing it for your own amusement, for I shall advise my uncle not to go by your vessel."

"Riled, mister? Jest a little bit, eh? All right. You'll cool down by the time I've got the custom-house chap here, and then we can settle terms."

He went off laughing, and for the moment I felt as if we were in his power.

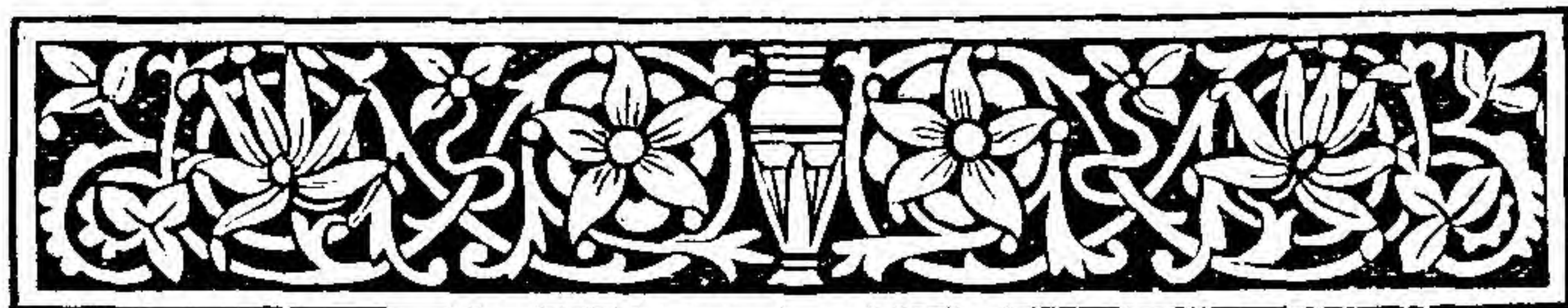
"All my labour will have been thrown away, Tom," I cried, "and we shall be called upon for explanations that I cannot give."

I called my uncle into the consultation, and we agreed that the best line to take was the defiant one.

"We are under no engagement to this fellow, Harry," said my uncle; "and we need not enter into one, as he would fleece you—perhaps rob you. For, once at sea on the vessel of such a man, he can play tyrant and do as he pleases."

"You are right, uncle; we will not go. But if he returns with one of the Spanish officials, what then?"

"Set him at defiance; and if you are driven to extremities, appeal to the British vice-consul for aid."



CHAPTER LII.

HELP AT A PINCH.

CAPTAIN Obadiah P. Perks came back at the end of an hour, when I had pretty well ripened my plans, and, retiring within the house, I left Tom to deal with him.

A tall, dark Spaniard was the captain's companion, and he might have been an official or an impostor in the skipper's pay. It was impossible to judge, though he wore something purporting to be a uniform.

"Wal, mister," the skipper said to Tom, "where's your young boss?"

"Busy," said Tom, blocking the doorway and coolly smoking his pipe.

"Then just you go and tell him that Kyaptin 'Badiah P. Perks is here with a gentleman who'll overhaul that stack o' chesties, and say whether I can take 'em board o' my schooner without getting into trouble."

"Oh! Mas'r Harry won't get you into no trouble, cap'en," said Tom, "nor he won't give you no trouble. He's altered his mind and won't go."

"Oh, no, he haven't," said the skipper. "Just you go and say Kyaptin 'Badiah P. Perks is here and wants to see him tew wunst."

For answer Tom drew a long breath and puffed out a cloud of smoke at the skipper.

"Air yew agoing?" said the latter.

"No," said Tom, "I air not. My young master don't want you, nor your ship, nor anything else. You wouldn't take the job when you could get it, so now it's gone."

The Yankee skipper turned of a warmer yellow, and there was a malignant gleam in his closely-set eyes as he thrust one hand into his pocket and drew it out directly.

"Here, I don't want to quarrel along o' you," he said sharply. "Go and tell him I want him, and he must come."

"Sha'n't," said Tom coolly. "Who are you ordering about? This here ain't aboard ship."

"It would be okkard fur yew, boy, if it weer board ship," snarled the skipper, going close up and thrusting his ugly face almost in Tom's. "Yew just do as I tell yew, my lad, 'fore it's worse for yew. Guess I don't want to quarrel."

"And guess I don't want to quarrel with you," said Tom; "though I allus have felt as if I should like to whack a sailor."

The man's hand went to his pocket again, but in spite of his furious glances Tom did not for a moment quail, giving him back again look for look.

"Guess it 'll be the worse for yew, stranger," said the skipper, "if you don't go and fetch out that theer fellow o' yourn."

"Guess it 'll be the worse for you, skipper, if you get shoving that sharp nose o' yours in my face," said Tom. "You ain't skretched me with it yet, but if you do, ware hawk!"

The man's face was a study. He wanted evidently to seize Tom and thrust him aside, but there was something so solid and muscular about Tom's body, and something so hard and bull-like about Tom's head, that few people would have cared to tackle him; and certainly, seeing how determined he was, the skipper did not feel disposed.

"Here, hi! you Englisher," shouted the fellow, "come out. I want a word with you."

"I say, don't make that row front of our house," said Tom. "There's ladies here; and if you do it again I shall have to do what they does at home with noisy people—move you on."

The skipper made a menacing movement towards Tom, and I was ready to go to his assistance, but Tom did not stir, only clenched his hand slowly in so ominous a manner that the skipper went no farther, but turned and advanced to his companion, before again approaching my faithful companion.

"Now, look ye here, mister," said the skipper. "I don't want to hurt you, so just you either get out o' the way or fetch your boss."

"If you don't get out," said Tom slowly, "I shall have to make you. Mas'r Harry don't want no trade with you at all, so s'pose you be off while your shoes are good."

"I will be off," said the skipper with a snarl, "and bring them here as will open some of your eyes a bit, and them chesties too."

Then saying something in a whisper to his companion they both hurried off, and for the rest of the day, in spite of the aspect I carried before those in the house, I was in no little trepidation

Late in the afternoon, when we had been expecting a call every moment from some one in authority, and Tom had been waiting ready to run off at the first attack to the British vice-consul, a quiet, firm-looking, sailor-like man came up to where I was standing.

"Are you the Englishman who wants to go with his family to Kingston?"

"Yes," I said, looking at him earnestly, for I was wondering whether it was a trap laid by the Yankee skipper.

"I just heard of it down at the wharf," he said. "I'll take you, only I sail to-night."

I was going to exclaim, "That's just what I want!" but restrained myself, and said quietly, "That's a very short notice."

"Well, 'tis, sir; but I'm all laden, and time's money. If you can be ready I'll take you, and be glad to earn the passage money, and do the best I can to make you and the ladies comfortable, but if you can't I must lose the job."

"We will be ready, then," I said; "only I have these heavy chests to go."

"Oh, they're nothing," said the skipper good-humouredly. "I'll bring the boat up abreast here, and four o' my lads. We'll soon have them in."

We soon settled about terms, which were reasonable enough, and promising to be there with the boat in an hour, the man left.

"Well, Tom, what is it?" I said excitedly. "A trap or honesty?"

"Honesty, Mas'r Harry," he cried sharply. "That chap's straightforrard enough."

"So I think," I cried, "and we'll risk it. To-morrow we may be stopped."

My aunt and Lilla were almost startled at the suddenness of the proposed departure, and my uncle looked anxious; but they said nothing, only made their final preparations, and soon after dark the fresh skipper came up with half a dozen men.

"I thought I'd bring enough," he said. "Now, my lads, be smart. Chest apiece, they ain't big."

It was all so sudden that my breath was almost taken away; but I had said that I would risk it, and there was nothing else to do but go on. In the darkness, too, it was hard to tell whether our property was all being fairly dealt with, but I watched as keenly as I could, and Tom went down to the boat with the first men, my uncle taking charge of Lilla and my aunt, while I stopped back at the house and sent all the luggage off.

It was pitchy dark now, and matters were carried out with a rapidity that was startling. In fact, in a quarter of an hour everything was on board the heavy boat, the men in their places, my aunt, Lilla, and my uncle in the stern sheets, and Tom and I were about to step in when Lilla exclaimed:

"Oh, Harry! I've left the great cloak in my room!"

I was about to exclaim "Never mind," and, in my excitement to get clear, order the men to push off, but it was Lilla's wish, and without a word I started back to fetch the cloak.

It was the most painful passage I ever had in my life. It was only minutes but it seemed hours, and with my heart beating furiously, I tried to crush down the fancies that kept coming into my head.

"Suppose," I thought, "that man is in the American skipper's pay, and that, now they have possession of my treasure, they should carry it off, and I should never see it more." I knew that I might go back and find the boat gone, pursuit would be vain in the darkness; and so tortured was I as I reached the house we had left, that I turned instead of going in, and stepped back to run down again to the boat.

That bit of indecision saved me, for just at my elbow a voice I recognized said:

"Now then, four o' you just go round to the back and stop whoever comes out. Two watch the windows, and we'll go in. I guess it 'll make the Englisher star'."

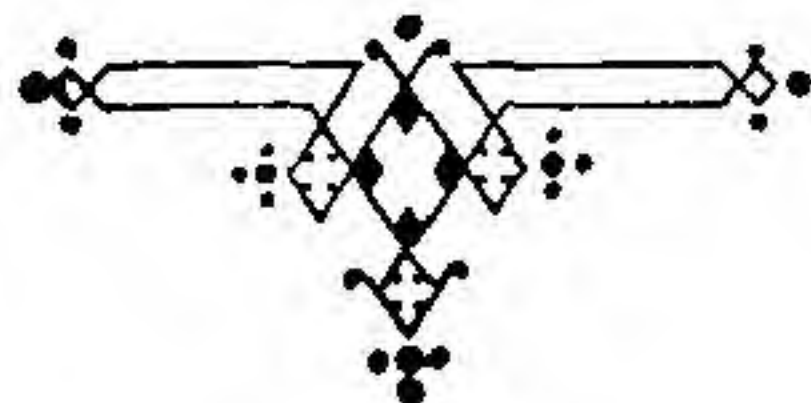
The Englisher did stare as he tried to gaze through the darkness, and then, feeling satisfied that the new skipper had nothing to do with the American, I stepped softly back, trembling with eagerness and excitement, and made my way down to the boat.

"All right," I said in as composed a manner as I could, and jumping in we were soon after being rowed softly down the river, past great vessel after vessel, all showing their mooring lights, till, wondering the while what sort of ship we were to have for our passage, we came at last alongside a large schooner, and were soon after safe aboard, treasure and all, of what proved to be a very good swift vessel.

In the morning when the sun rose we were going rapidly down towards the mouth of the great river, but it was not until we were well out at sea that I felt safe from pursuit, and told my uncle of our narrow escape.

"But I have not been able to find the great cloak, Harry," said Lilla

“No,” I replied; “it was a question whether I should leave the cloak or myself, so I left the cloak,” and then I told her of my adventure in the dark.





CHAPTER LIII.

“HUZZA! WE’RE HOMEWARD BOUND.”

AND now it seemed as if our difficulties were at an end, for the passage to Kingston, Jamaica, was a pleasant one, and we took our berths from there in the mail, which landed us in safety at Southampton, without a soul suspecting the nature of the treasure that we had on board, one which we had gone through so much peril to obtain.

It was a fine evening in July, that, after leaving my uncle and the others at a comfortable London hotel, Tom and I, after a quick run down by rail, found ourselves once more in the streets of the little town which we had left upon our setting off to foreign lands in quest of our fortunes.

How familiar everything seemed and yet how shrunken! Houses that I used to consider large appeared to have grown small, and people that I had been in the habit of considering great and important, somehow looked as if they were of no consequence at all.

“Lor’, look ye there, Mas’r Harry, they’re practising in the cricket field. What a while it seems since I have handled a bat! Come and give us a few balls, the chaps would be glad enough to see us.”

"No, no, Tom," I said hastily, "I want to see the old people."

"Oh, yes, of course, I forgot all about that, Mas'r Harry. I haven't got no one to see."

"Why, what about Sally?" I said.

"Pooh, it's all nonsense! What stuff! How you do talk, Mas'r Harry!" he cried indignantly. "Just as if Sally was anything to me!"

"Come, Tom," I said, "you know you were always very great friends."

"Friends, Mas'r Harry! Why, she were allus giving me spanks in the face. I do wish you wouldn't be so foolish, Mas'r Harry."

"All right, Tom," I said, for he was speaking in quite an ill-used tone. "There, what's that?" I cried, as with beating heart, longing to look into the old home and yet almost afraid, I stopped short at the corner of the lane, and caught Tom by the arm.

"What's that?" cried Tom grinning, as he took a long sniff. "Taller. Say, Mas'r Harry, after missing it all this long time, it don't smell so very bad after all."

"Well, it is not nice, Tom," I said smiling, "but how familiar it all does seem! What days and nights it does recall! Why, Tom, we hardly seem to have been away."

"Oh, but don't we though?" said Tom, pulling down the front of a new waistcoat and pushing his hat a little on one side. "We went away nobodies like, at least I did, Mas'r Harry, and I've come back an independent gentleman. I wonder whether Sally's altered."

I did not make any reply, but walked steadily on till I reached the familiar gates leading into our yard, and

through which I had seen the laden van pass so many hundreds of times. There beyond it was the soap-house with its barred window, the tall chimney, and, on looking over, there were the usual litter of old and new boxes, while an unpleasantly scented steam was floating out upon the evening air.

How strange and yet how familiar it all seemed! How old and shabby and forlorn everything looked, and yet how dear! I wanted to creep in and catch my mother in my arms, but something seemed to hold me back, so that I dare not stir.

I walked straight by, with Tom following me slowly, looking across at the opposite side of the road, and whistling softly, and as we walked on I could see into the garden, and my heart gave a throb, for, instead of being neat and well stocked as of old, everything appeared to have been neglected—creepers had run wild, the apple and pear trees were covered with long shoots, and tall thistles and nettles stood in clumps.

My heart seemed to stand still, and I hesitated no longer. My father must be ill, I thought, or the garden in which he took so much pride would never have been allowed to run wild like that.

“Tom,” I said, “there’s something wrong.”

“Lor’, no, Mas’r Harry, not there. Nothing’s wrong, only that Sally’s left, and that’s all right, ain’t it?”

I did not answer, but, going to the yard gate, pushed it open, and the hinges gave a dismal creak.

“Bit o’ soap would not hurt them,” said Tom sententiously, and he followed me through the yard.

I peeped in at the old, familiar boiling-house, but though work had lately been in progress there was no

one there; so I went on to the back door and was about to enter, but Tom laid his hand on my arm.

"Would you mind my going in first, Mas'r Harry?" he said softly. "I know it ain't right, but I should like to go in just once—first."

I drew back and Tom stepped forward to go in, but as he raised his hand to the latch he dropped it again and turned back to me.

"'Twouldn't be right, sir, for me to go afore you; and don't you think, Mas'r Harry, now that you're a great, rich gentleman just come over from foreign abroad, that it would be more genteel-like to go round to the front and give a big knock afore you went in?"

"Well, let's go round to the front, Tom. Perhaps it isn't right to come round here. We might startle them."

"Wouldn't startle Sally, even if she were here, Mas'r Harry. Nothing never did startle she, though she ain't here now."

The fact was that I felt as nervous and tremulous about going in as poor Tom, and accordingly we went round to the front, and after a moment's hesitation I gave a rap at the door.

No answer.

I rapped again, and then, finding the door unfastened, I pushed against it with trembling hand to find it yield, and, walking straight in, I turned to the right and entered the little parlour.

As I went in some one who had been sitting back asleep in the easy-chair started up and took a great red handkerchief from his face.

As he did this I was advancing with open hands, but only to stop short, for it was not my father.

"Hillo!" said the stranger, a dirty-looking man with an inflamed nose.

"Hallo!" I said; "who are you?"

"Who am I?" said the stranger, staring at me as if I were asking a most absurd question. "Why, persession—that's about what I am. Are you come to pay me out?"

"Pay you out!—possession!" I faltered. "Why, what does it mean?"

"Sold by hockshin without reserve by one of the morkygees," said the man, "soon as the inwintory's took."

"Where are my father and mother?" I said, with my heart sinking at the idea of the distress they must have been in.

"Now, then!" said a sharp voice, and a young woman came to the inner door; "who do you want?"

"Sally!" whispered Tom excitedly.

"Why, Sally!" I exclaimed, "don't you know me again?"

"It isn't Master Harry, is it?" she said wonderingly.

"Yes, Sally," I said. "Why, how you have altered and improved!"

"Get along, Master Harry; it's you that's improved. Who's that big, stoopid-looking young man with you?"

"Oh, I say!" groaned Tom.

"Oh, I see!" she said carelessly, "it's the boy!"

"Ain't she hard on a fellow, Mas'r Harry?" whispered Tom; but I did not reply, for I was questioning Sally.

"What! haven't you heard?" she said.

"No, I've heard nothing," I exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

“’Bout master’s having failed, and a set o’ wretches”—here she glanced at the dirty-looking man—“coming and robbing him of his business, and his house, and his furniture, and everything a’most he’s got.”

“No, no, Sally, I have heard nothing. But are they well?”

“Oh, yes, as well as folks can be as is being robbed by folks who come sitting in all the chairs with hankychers over their heads, and going to sleep all over the place.”

“But where are they?” I cried; “upstairs?”

“Upstairs? No,” cried Sally. “They’re down at the little cottage in Back Lane, where old Mrs. Wigley used to live.”

“I’ll run down at once,” I cried. “Come along, Tom!”

I did not look back, for I was intent upon my task; and if I had I should have had no satisfaction, for Tom had stayed behind, as he afterwards said, to look after old master’s property; but I never believed that tale for several reasons, one being that Tom looked shamefaced and awkward as he said it, and circumstances afterwards tended to show that he had some other reason.

The old cottage named was one that I well remembered, and my spirit seemed to sink lower and lower as I neared the place; for it was terrible to think of those whom I had left, if not in affluence, at least in a comfortable position in life, brought down to so sad and impecunious a state, suffering real poverty, and with the home of so many years now in the broker’s hands.

Then I felt a wave of high spirits come over me, as it were, to hurl me down and then lift me and carry me on and on, till I literally set off and ran down turning after turning, till I came to the little whitewashed cottage where my father and mother had their abode.

I half-paused for a moment, and then tapping lightly, raised the latch and entered.

My father was seated at a common uncovered deal table, poring over an old account-book, as if in hopes of finding a way out of his difficulties. My mother, looking very care-worn and grey, was seated by a back window mending some old garments, and now and then stopping to wipe her eyes. At least that is what I presumed, for she was in the act of wiping them as I dashed in.

"Mother! father!" I exclaimed, and the next moment the poor old lady was sobbing in my arms, kissing me again and again, and amidst her sobbing telling my father that she knew how it would be—that it had been foolish of him to despair, for she was certain that her boy would come back and help them as soon as he knew that they were in trouble.

"When did you get the letter, my darling?" she said as she clung closer to me.

"Letter!" I said; "I've had no letter."

My mother looked up at me wonderingly.

"Had no letter, Harry?"

"No, my dear mother; I have not had a line since I have been gone."

My mother loosened her hold of me and turned to my father as he stood looking on.

"You did not write to him," she said.

"Oh, yes, I daresay he did, mother," I cried, "but of late I have been travelling about a great deal."

"Then the letter would have come back, Harry," said my mother. "He did not write."

"No," said my father quietly; "I did not write. What

was the use of troubling the poor fellow about our miserable affairs when he was far away?"

"Then you did not come, Harry, because we were in trouble?"

"No, mother," I replied. "I came home because my task was done."

"Your task was done?" said my mother. "I don't understand you. I thought you went to work at your uncle's."

"I was with my uncle, mother," I replied, enjoying the knowledge of the surprise I had in store, and feeling that now, indeed, the treasure I had found was worth having, for what changes it would work! "but he was in trouble too."

"In trouble!" said my father and mother in a breath.

"Yes, he was in the same predicament as you are, and his coffee plantation was going to be sold up."

"What an unhappy family ours is!" said my mother. "Harry — Harry! you might as well have stayed at home."

"If I had stayed at home, mother, would it have spared you this trouble?"

"I—I don't know, my boy. Would it, my dear?" she said, turning to my father.

"No, wife—no," he said; "Harry was quite right to go. He foresaw what was coming, and how useless it was for me to try. The hardest part of it, my lad, is that I can't go out of business an honest man and pay every one his due."

"Don't fret, dear," said my mother; "you've done your best and given up everything. But tell me, Harry," she cried, "what did my poor brother do? Had he no friend to help him?"

"Yes, mother."

"And did he?"

"Yes, mother."

"What! paid his debts?"

"Yes, dear mother."

"God bless him!" said my mother fervently. "I wish I could take him by the hand. And how is your uncle now?"

"He was quite well when I left him to-day, mother."

"Left him!—to-day?" said my mother wonderingly.

"Yes, he is in town. I brought him with me, and he will come down and see you with some one, mother, I want you very much to love."

"You foolish boy!" said my mother. "Ah, Harry—Harry! you are too young to think of that."

"I'm sorry he's coming to see us," said my father sadly. "We are not in condition to see company, wife."

"No," said my mother, sighing as she glanced round. "But don't be downhearted, dear," she cried more cheerfully; "when things are at their worst they always mend, and I think they have got to their worst now, and have begun to mend, for Harry has come back."

"Yes, mother," I cried, unable to keep back my good news, knowing as I did how welcome it must be to them at such a time. "Yes, mother, I have come back, and brought with me the friend who helped my poor uncle in such a strait, and now he shall help you."

"Ah, but my dear boy, we have no claims upon your uncle's friend."

"The greatest of claims, mother," I cried excitedly, "for he is your own flesh and blood."

"Harry!" cried my father, "what do you mean? Did you help your uncle?"

"Yes, father," I said modestly.

"And paid his debts?"

"Yes, father, and now I'm going to pay yours, or rather you are going to pay them yourself, and be what you called—an honest man."

His eyes lit up, and he looked as if he were about to catch me by the hands, but he stopped short and shook his head.

"No, no, no, my boy, you do not understand these things. I owe nearly five hundred pounds."

"My dear father," I cried, "I'm ready to pay it if you owe nearly five thousand. I went out to make my fortune and I have made it, and I never knew its value thoroughly till I came home to-day. There, come away home and I'll pay out that fellow, and—oh, come, mother—mother, mother!" I cried as I took hold of her hands to raise her up, for she had sunk upon her knees and was embracing my legs. "You must not give way like this, or you will make me behave like a great girl."

"It is because I am so happy," she sobbed, and as I raised her so that she could weep on my shoulder, my father caught me by the hand.

"God bless you, my boy! God bless you!" he cried. "I won't question you now, for like your mother I feel as if this is more than I can bear."

We lost no time as soon as they had grown calmer. For though I had not the money with me sufficient to pay all my father's debts, I had plenty to pay what was needed to get rid of the unpleasant tenant of my old home, and that night I slept happily once more beneath its roof.

I had hard work to satisfy the old people about my right to the large sum of money I had brought back,

but I found no difficulty with their creditors, who took the cash without asking any questions, and were very loud in their praises, saying that I was the best of sons, which was all nonsense, for I should have been the worst of sons if I had not done my duty as I did.

The next few months were chiefly spent in getting things into order, and in the midst of my busiest time Tom came to me one day, bringing with him Sally.

"Hallo!" I said, "what does this mean?"

"Oh, nothing at all, Mas'r Harry; only now I'm settled as a gentleman of property I'm going to be married."

"Don't you believe him, Master Harry," said Sally; "it's all his nonsense," and she was scarlet as she spoke.

"Don't you believe her, Mas'r Harry," said Tom grinning; "she promised me she would, and she can't draw back, can she?"

"Certainly not, Tom," I said. "A lady's under her bond just as a gentleman is."

"There! hear that, Sally?" said Tom.

"Yes, I hear," she said, "so I suppose I must;" and Sally spoke in quite a resigned way, keeping her word to Tom within three months, my father saying that Sally had been the most faithful of servants, and had forced upon them all her little savings in the time of their distress.

You may be sure I did not forget this on the day when my father gave her away, and Tom had a nice little dowry with his wife.

It may be thought that, with so great a sum of money—so large a fortune—I must have lived in great splendour during the rest of my life. But it was not so. Certainly I have always since enjoyed the comfort of a pleasant, well-kept, unostentatious home; but the fact is

this—it was my fate to marry a woman generous almost to a fault. As you have seen, she began by giving the greatest treasure I found in the New World—herself—to me; and then, upon the strength of our having plenty of money, she was of opinion that its proper purpose was being spent in doing good to others.

My uncle and Mrs. Landell were settled in a pleasant little estate of their own; and after a great deal of persuasion my father was induced to take upon himself the position of a country gentleman. One way and another our income became shrunk down to very reasonable proportions; though, after Lilla has done all the good that she can in the course of the year, we have always a little to spare.

My story is ended. And now that grey hairs have made their appearance, bringing with them sounder thought and the ripe judgment of experience, I often go over my adventures again, and chat about them with Tom, and Sally his wife, when I have taken a run over to their prosperous farm; but in spite of all the success that has attended me and mine, I think, have thought, and I hope I shall still think to my last day, that my journey to the New World, my adventures, and all I gained, would have been but so much vanity and emptiness had I not won Lilla, who has shed upon my life a sunshine such as has proved that after all *she* was the true gold.

THE END.

"English boys owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Henty."—*Athenæum*.

Blackie & Son's Illustrated Story Books

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G. A. HENTY

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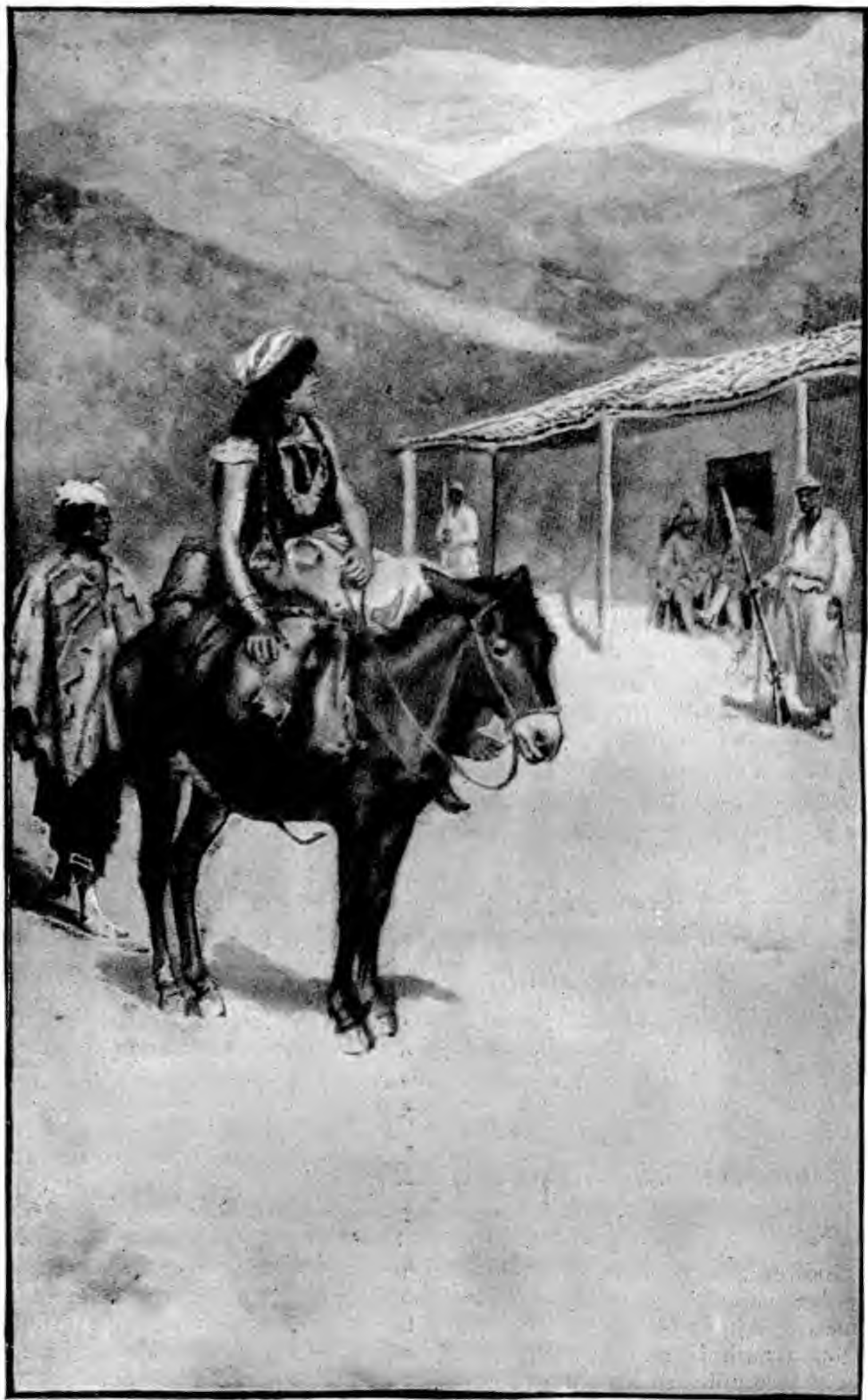
Two English lads go to Holland in the service of one of "the fighting Veres". After many adventures one of the lads finds himself on board a Spanish ship at the defeat of the Armada, and escapes from Spain only to fall into the hands of the Corsairs. He is successful, however, in getting back to Spain, and regains his native country after the capture of Cadiz.

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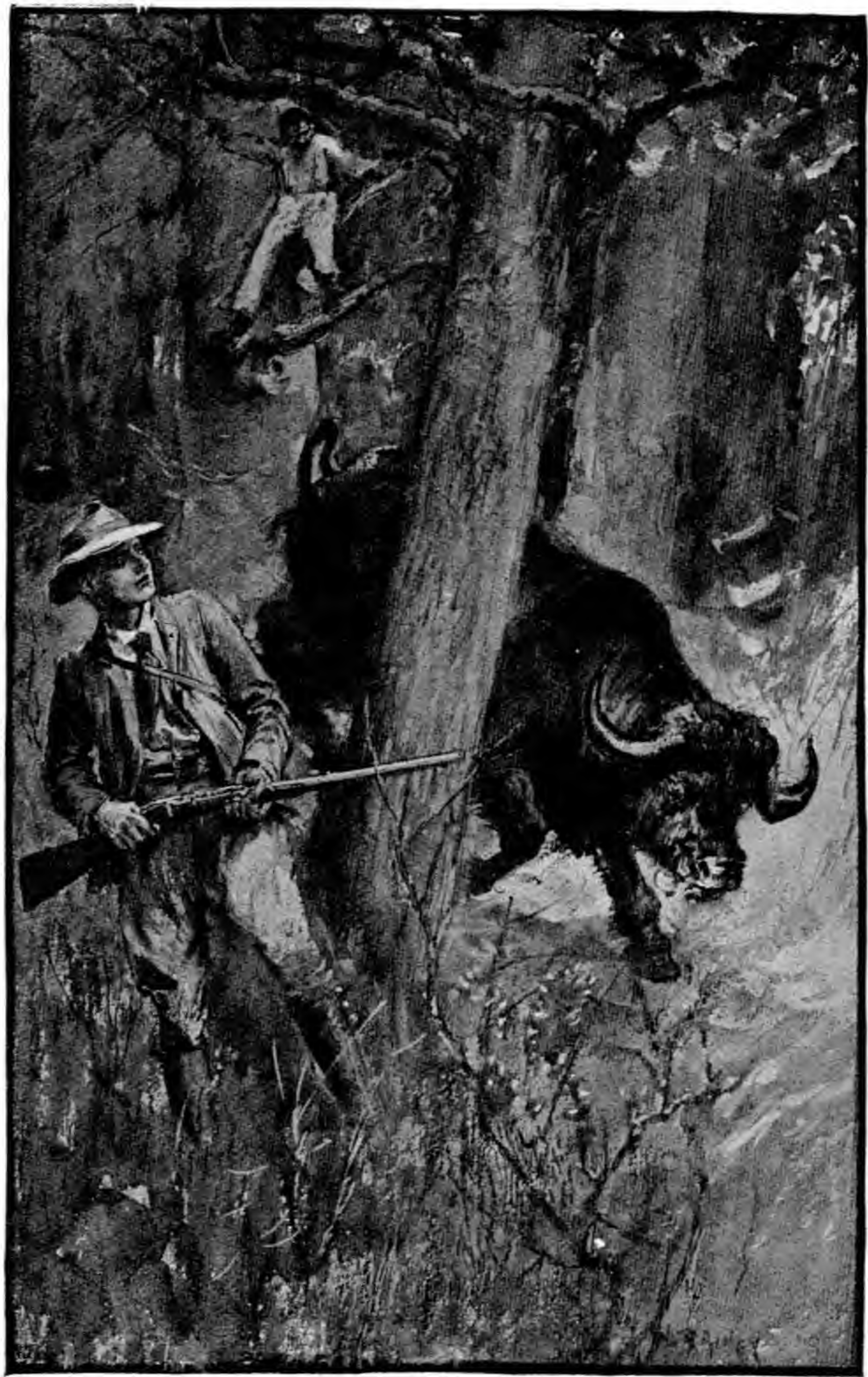
The boy Nat and his uncle go on a voyage to the islands of the Eastern seas to seek specimens in natural history, and their adventures there are full of interest and excitement. The descriptions of Mr. Ebony, their black comrade, and of the scenes of savage life sparkle with genuine humour.

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Gilbert Oglander, and his friend, Timothy Trollope, join in Lord Thomas Howard's expedition to intercept the Spanish treasure-fleet from the West Indies, and are on board *The Revenge* in the memorable fight between that one little man-of-war and fifty-three great galleons of Spain. After the battle come storm and shipwreck, and the lads, having drifted for days, find refuge on board a derelict galleon, whence they are rescued and brought home to England.

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"Few stories come within hailing distance of *Stimson's Reef* in startling incidents and hairbreadth 'scapes. It may almost vie with Mr. R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*." *Guardian*.

From ONE OF THE FIGHTING SCOUTS



BY CAPT. F. S. BRERETON

(See page 11)

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A lad whose name has been lost amidst early buffetings by hard fortune suffers many hardships at the hands of a bargeman, his master, and runs away. The various adventures and experiences with which he meets on the road to success, the bear-hunt in which he takes part, and the battle at which he acts as war correspondent, form a story of absorbing interest and after a boy's own heart.

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